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Fire Service in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, 1844-1910

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**Bridgewater, Massachusetts
A Town in Transition**

**Fire Service
Bridgewater, Massachusetts
1844-1910**

**Dr. Benjamin A. Spence
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An Explanation

For several years I have had the pleasure of delving into the history of Bridgewater, Massachusetts, concentrating on the first quarter of the twentieth century and providing, when appropriate, historical background to make my discussions clearer. Although my research and writing are ongoing, I have decided to make available drafts of a number of topics which I have explored at length, with the hope that the material presented will prove helpful to many readers. I would request that credit be given if my findings are used by other writers or those making oral presentations.

As my study has proceeded, many people have been helpful and, hopefully, I will be able to thank all of them during the course of my writing. At this point, let me mention just a few who have been especially supportive. Many thanks to the Trustees of Bridgewater's Public Library for allowing me free access to the sources in the town's library, made easier by the aid given to me by the research librarians under the competent direction of Mary O'Connell. Without the constant aid of Dr. Steven G. Young, I would have been at a loss many times in how to proceed in the use of the computer. Many thanks to Sylvia B. Larson who has been willing to spend numerous hours using her fine editing skills and her probing historical mind to improve greatly these drafts, all the while sharing my great interest in the history of Bridgewater. Any errors in these pieces, of course, are solely mine. What a great joy it is to share many of my findings with S. Mabell Bates, who, as a friend, head of the special collection at Bridgewater State College Library, and member of the Bridgewater Historical Commission, has provided me with valuable historical material and has been a constant source of inspiration. My research has also been enriched by the many conversations with Robert Wood, a member of Bridgewater's Historical Commission and the town's leading authority on the history of property deeds. He has been most generous in sharing his findings with me. Lastly, my research, particularly concerning the Bridgewater Normal School, would have been far less interesting without my many conversations with David K. Wilson, long associated with public relations and institutional research at Bridgewater State College. I appreciate his willingness to share his historical knowledge of the college, videotape my tours of Bridgewater's School Street and Central Square, begin the time-consuming task of placing some of my writings on a web-site, and advise me on putting my essays into more permanent forms.

In preparing this essay on firefighting, I owe a special debt of gratitude to James Mike Bois, George B. Rizer and David R. Moore, all citizens of Bridgewater who contributed in different ways to a collection of

historical pictures of the town. Bois, one of the Bridgewater Historical Collectors, diligently collected over 450 scenes of Bridgewater, many of which were included in the two pictorial histories, 1987 and 1994, prepared by the Collectors. Equally important was the contribution of Rizer, a professional photographer for the Boston Globe, whose artistic skill reproduced all the pictures in these two works, “bringing to life some that were faded or in some way defective.” Thanks to the skillful and time-consuming work of David R. Moore, Chairman of Bridgewater’s Historical Commission, over 500 historical pictures, including many found in the two earlier works, have now been digitized and placed on one computer disc, labeled the Rizer Collection, creating an historical treasure easily accessible to those interested in the town’s rich heritage. I will continue to include pictures from this collection in future essays.

In addition to making use of the Rizer Collection, readers will note that three other features are more prominent in this essay on firefighting, the sixth, so far, in my ongoing study: Bridgewater, Massachusetts: A Town in Transition.^{*} Footnotes frequently cite one of my first five studies, allowing readers and, indeed, myself to cross reference relevant material. I have also included more subject matter references, perhaps violating at times the dictum that if historical facts are not important enough to include in the text, they should not be in a footnote. Since I have done a great deal of research on a variety of topics dealing with Bridgewater’s history, I have on occasion informed my readers of my intentions to write about some of them in the future. Only time will tell if my ambitions outreach my grasp.

One final note concerning bibliography: At some juncture, I will present an essay on the sources used in my study. For now, the numerous footnotes will give the reader a good idea of the research materials used in this historical account of the Town of Bridgewater.

^{*} My works on education, churches, stores and services, manufacturing, transportation, and fire service in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, concentrate on the years between 1900 and 1910, but also, when appropriate, include extensive historical background. Copies of these studies can be found in the Bridgewater Public Library, the Maxwell Library of Bridgewater State College, the Memorial Building of the Old Bridgewater Historical Society in West Bridgewater, and the library of the Old Colony Historical Society in Taunton, Massachusetts.

Fire Service to 1910

Bridgewater, Massachusetts

In his 1884 History of Bridgewater, Joshua E. Crane, one of the town's leading civic leaders and proprietor of a general store on the corner of Broad and Summer Streets, succinctly wrote: "Bridgewater has an efficient fire department. Its organization has existed about forty years." Considering the merits of this evaluation and remembering that present-day Bridgewater between 1716 and the early 1820's was the South Parish of the larger Bridgewater incorporated in 1656, two points of clarification need to be made concerning the town's first firefighting association. First--between 1844 and 1894, firefighting was not a service directly provided by the town, but rather by a private entity known as the Bridgewater Fire District. Empowered by an act of the General Court (Massachusetts's state legislature) on March 16, 1844, this organization proceeded to create a "fire department," set the boundaries of the area receiving fire protection, and use its authority "to assess taxes against the real estate therein," as a way of financing a more efficient way of responding to fires of varying intensity. Second--unlike large American cities, such as Cincinnati, New York, and Philadelphia, where professional fire departments were established in 1853, 1865, and 1871, respectively, or even Taunton, a small city located just to the southwest of Bridgewater, which began professionalizing its firefighting force in late 1860's, the small community of Bridgewater did not replace its voluntary fire department by a permanent and paid fire force until 1926, thirty-two years after the town became responsible for providing fire protection.¹

At a meeting in October of 1844, officers of the Fire District were elected, and decisions were made to purchase an engine and to erect an engine house. Artemus Hale, already known for his public service to Bridgewater, including representing the town in both chambers of the state legislature and helping to secure a Normal School for this small community of around 2,500, was elected as the first Chief Engineer of the "Department;" his son, Artemus Hale, Jr., was chosen to serve as the clerk. Initiating an organizational pattern that would continue even after the town took over the firefighting service, Eli Washburn, Axel Dearborn, George W. Bates, and Philip D. Kingman were appointed assistant engineers. The latter, a native of Middleboro, who had settled in Bridgewater in 1834 and whose son Hosea became a prominent Bridgewater lawyer after the Civil War, succeeded Hale as the Chief Engineer

¹ Bridgewater Independent, September 26, 1891, March 17, 1894; this local newspaper was indispensable to my research and subsequently will be cited as BI; Joshua E. Crane, "History of Bridgewater," Hurd's History of Plymouth County (Philadelphia: The J. W. Lewis & Co., 1884), p. 810; I sometimes used a reprint of Crane's history done by The Bridgewater Historical Collectors, 1986, ed. by James William Buckley and Katherine Pratt Jordan; Herbert K. Pratt, "The First Hundred Years," no pagination; found in the files of the Bridgewater Public Library, this useful piece was written for the observance of the Golden Anniversary of the Bridgewater Fire Department; Thomas J. Dunning, Jr., "Fire Departments," The Reader's Companion to American History, ed. by Eric Foner and John A. Garraty (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), pp. 400-403; Gloria W. Moran, "Fire Department," History Highlights: Bridgewater, Massachusetts-A Commemorative Journal ed. by Katherine M. Doherty (Taunton, Massachusetts: Published for The Bridgewater Bicentennial Commission by William S. Sullwold, Publishing, 1976), pp. 58-59; this latter source was very important to my research and will be cited as HH in subsequent references; William F. Hanna, A History of Taunton Massachusetts (Taunton, Massachusetts: Old Colony Historical Society, 2007), p. 245; the volunteer firefighters of Bridgewater were paid for the hours actually spent in fighting fires and, at much lower rate, for the time spent in practice sessions.

in 1845 and like his predecessor served in the position for only one year. During the fifty years in which the Fire District had the responsibility for combating fires, ten civic-minded men served as the Chief Engineer, not a fulltime occupation, but also one without remuneration .²

After organizing, the most pressing task for the District was to secure equipment and a place in which to house it. At the meeting in October, the decision was made to “to purchase an engine from L. & E. Thayer, of Boston....” Known as *Veto No. 1*, this first engine was a so-called “tub” and cost \$341.65, a sum raised by popular subscription. A simple piece of hand-operated apparatus, it was placed as near the scene of fire as possible and was “filled by buckets passed from hand to hand from the nearest water supply.” (It might be noted at this point that Bridgewater would not have a centralized water system until the late 1880’s.) On June 7, 1851, the District acquired a second engine, dubbing it *Ousamequin No. 2*, a name undoubtedly familiar to all historically-minded town citizens since Bridgewater had been incorporated two centuries earlier on land acquired from the friendly Sachem of the Wampanoags, Ousamequin, also referred to as Massasoit. Indicative of the cooperation between town government and the District, this new piece of equipment, bought from a company in Roxbury, Massachusetts, for about \$1,200, was paid for by the town, but “was placed in the custody of the Fire District,” doubling, it is said, the effectiveness of Bridgewater’s firefighting service. Despite the adoption of self-propelled steam engines by some large American communities in the 1850’s, Bridgewater, like many other small communities, continued to rely solely on its hand-operated apparatus until the 1880’s. At first housed in a “fire house” on the corner of Main and Union Streets, the district’s two engines in 1858 were placed in a new home, a brick building costing \$2,1106.72, located on a School Street lot between the garden of Dr. Calvin Barton Pratt and the Town Hall, itself only fifteen years old. This new fire station, which would serve Bridgewater for many years to come, even after firefighting became a town responsibility, was strategically situated since most of the homes and other structures under the District’s protection were in Central Square and its surrounding areas.³

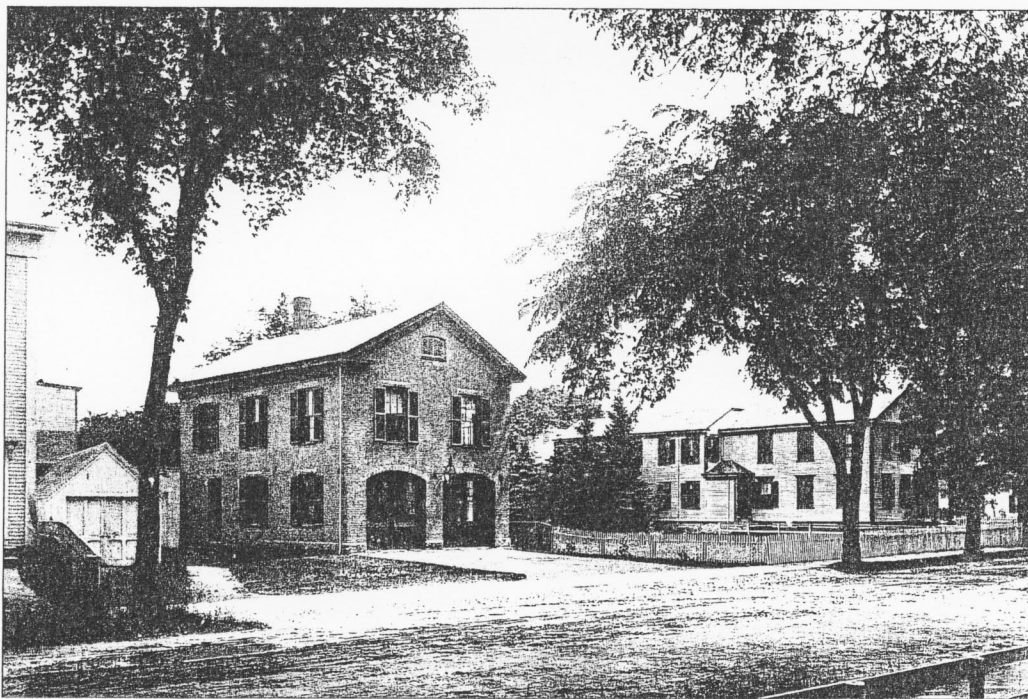
Although it is not my intention to do so, writing a detailed account of the work of the Bridgewater Fire District during its first three decades or so would be difficult for several reasons. Three

² Census of Massachusetts, 1905, Vol. 1, p. 819; Lucia Alden Bradford Knapp, “Recollections of Bridgewater,” The Bridgewater Book Illustrated (Taunton, Massachusetts: William S. Sullwold Publishing, Inc., 1985, p. 25; published by the Old Bridgewater Historical Society, this work includes material from two earlier books in 1899 and 1908, and some invaluable information and pictures that takes us to around 1916; for most future citations of this source, it will not be possible to give pages; Crane, pp. 796, 810; Pratt, “The First Hundred years,” “Bridgewater Fire Department,” Tales Around the Common,” ed. by Dorothy Lord Mann, Arthur C. Lord, and J. Kenneth Moore (Bridgewater: Dorr’s Printing Shop, 1988), pp. 19-20; Moran, “Fire Department,” HH, p. 58; “Hale, Artemas, 1783 to 1882--Businessman, legislator,” HH, p. 265; for more about Artemas Hale see pages 16-17 in my essay on education in Bridgewater through 1910.

³ BI, March 23, June 6, 1895, June 20, 1896; Crane, p. 810; Pratt, “The First Hundred Years,” Moran, “Fire Department,” HH, p. 58; David R. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater (Charleston, SC.: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), p. 109; the picture in this last source is especially valuable because it shows the School Street Fire Station before it was flanked by a lodging house to the east and a hook and ladder house and hose tower to the west; hereafter, any work by David R. Moore will be cited as written by D. Moore; Pictorial History of Bridgewater, Massachusetts (Bridgewater: Dorr’s Print Shop; Whitman: Harry B. Harding and Sons Printers, 1987), pp. 12, 59; this source is one of two pictorial histories of Bridgewater, thanks to the work of the Historical Collectors, particularly James Mike Bois, and to George B. Rizer, the photographer for the project; “Bridgewater Fire Department,” Tales

Ten

POLICE AND FIRE



Taken c. 1870, this is probably the earliest photograph of the Bridgewater Fire Station. The lodging house was not yet built between it and the Hunt home on School Street.

David R. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p.109.

considerations come to mind: the problem of locating District records; the brevity of the few available secondary sources; and the absence of a local newspaper in Bridgewater until the late 1870's. Such a paper would have undoubtedly covered the meetings of the District and given details on the worst fires as they menaced the town. This said, a few points can be made. Annual fall meetings of the District were held in the hall on the second floor of the 1858 School Street Station and, I assume, could be attended by any citizen owning property in the Fire District. Such matters as the formation of committees, the condition of equipment, tax assessments needed to pay for fire protection, and the choice of officers for the coming year were on the agenda. Following Hale and Kingman, William Latham, Gad Robison, Caleb Hobart, Sumner Keith, 2nd, John P. Townsend, John A. Winslow, and Arthur Hooper, all well-known in the town, took their turns as Chief Engineer. That Bridgewater's town government played at least an auxiliary role in assisting the Fire District was obvious in the ten years following the Civil War. The 1869 Annual Report, for example, list two payments totaling \$300 paid to two individuals for detecting the work of incendiaries. Along with financial aid from the state and subscriptions from private interests, including Lazell, Perkins & Co. and Artemas Hale, the town contributed in the early 1870's to the cost of constructing cisterns or reservoirs, including the one "near the center of the village," where clusters of wooden buildings were more than susceptible to the menace of fire. In 1874, thirty years after the establishment of the Bridgewater Fire District, Article 13 on the Warrant before the Annual Town Meeting read: "To see what action the town will take to establish a Fire Department including the whole town in place of the present Fire District." The proposal was not enacted, but its introduction perhaps suggests some discontent by property owners in the outlying areas not within the limits of the Fire District. Some citizens in the defined area, on the other hand, might have supported the change, feeling they were carrying an unfair tax assessment since the District tended to respond to fires not in the District and then request some payment from the town. ⁴

What can be said of the District's ability to fight fires as the population of Bridgewater increased from around 2,800 in 1850 to almost 3,000 thirty-five years later? A mechanical alarm system and horses were not integral parts of firefighting efforts until the 1880's, making it difficult for engineers and volunteers to always reach fires in a timely fashion, especially those some distance from the School Street Station. On arriving at the fire barn, the volunteer firefighters, who often came from their places of employment, would proceed to haul the two engines and other equipment, including the necessary hosing, to the fire, hoping a source of water was readily available. While not having statistics at this point, I suspect the great majority of fires were those that threatened grasslands, forests, and houses, the latter often caused by chimney defects. Sometimes blazes of greater intensity destroyed an industrial enterprise, a retail store, or a house of worship. It would be fair to assume that the District responded to fires at the

Around the Common, p. 20; Ken Moore, "Map of 1852, Tales Around the Common, p. 4.

⁴ Annual Report of the Selectman and Overseers of the Poor of the Town of Bridgewater For the Year ending Feb. 28, 1870 (North Bridgewater: Gazette Job Printing Establishment, 1870), p. 13; for the Year ending Feb. 29, 1872 (Boston: Printed by Solon Thornton, 1872), pp. 14-15; for the Year ending Feb. 28, 1875 (Boston: Daniel Dwyer, Steam Printer, 1875), pp. 33-34; Pratt, "The First Hundred Years;" Moran, "Fire Department," HH, p. 58; Tales Around the Common, pp. 19-20.

new cotton gin factory of Bates, Hyde & Co. on Pearl Street in 1850, the Bridgewater Iron Works off High Street on the Town River, caused by a terrible explosion, in June of 1862, and the two-storied wooden tin shop of Charles M. Jewett on Broad Street in the early 1870's. For the period under discussion, the only fire cited by Herbert K. Pratt in his "The First Hundred Years," an account of firefighting service in Bridgewater between 1844 to 1944, was the blaze that destroyed the wooden Congregational Church, on August 6, 1860, erected twenty four years earlier on the southwest corner of Central Square. In the words of a later pastor, this disastrous fire reduced the structure to "a heap of smoldering ashes and a lump of melted bell metal." Even before the addition of other wooden buildings to Central Square, including the Fairbanks-Prophett building, 1864, the enlargement of the Elwell retail block, 1890's, both located on the eastern side of Central Square, and the Odd Fellows Block, 1897, and the Independent Building, 1898, on the opposite side of the Square, this church fire began to make it apparent that the clustering of numerous wooden buildings in the town's center posed a fire threat to Bridgewater. (One might say that it still does.) While the final call did not come, the District, despite limited resources, was notified to be ready to assist other companies in quelling the big Boston fire of 1872. Even with the aid of horses, not employed in local fires at this time, it would have taken four or five hours for engines and men of the District to reach the state's capital.⁵

Continuity and change characterized the Bridgewater Fire District in the 1880's. Annual meetings held each fall continued to choose engineers, review equipment needs, and decide on the necessary tax assessment for the coming year. After being Chief Engineer for five years, Arthur Hooper, a Civil War veteran and a state legislator in 1881, was succeeded by Darius C. Ford who served in this position until 1894, the year in which the town-run Fire Department was established. With the weekly publication of the Bridgewater Independent, beginning in 1876-1877, townsfolk (and later historians) began to have a better picture of the District's work and those citizens who took a special interest in its firefighting efforts. An account of the 1885 meeting, for example, cites the comments of several well-known attendees, all of whom were motivated by their long-standing civic commitment to Bridgewater's well-being, including support and praise for those combating fires. Dr. Lewis G. Lowe, although an 1864 graduate of Harvard Medical College, had founded an insurance business in Bridgewater around 1870, which served as an agent for companies dealing in fire insurance. His beautiful and spacious wooden house (now the Bridgewater Nursing Home) on the corner of South and Pleasant Streets and his office in the brick Savings Bank Building fell within the Fire District. Equally committed to the work of the Fire District was Dr. Edward Sawyer who settled in Bridgewater in 1860, after completing his studies at Harvard Medical School. During the following thirty years, he not only became

⁵ BI, Oct. 10, 1885, June 20, Aug. 14, 1896, Oct. 12, 1900, Feb. 4, 18, 1910, Nov. 17, 1922; Census of Massachusetts, 1905, Vol., I, p. 819; Atlas of Plymouth County, 1903, L. J. Richards & Co., 1903; Pratt, "The First Hundred Years;" Moran, "Fire Department," HH, p. 58; Tales Around the Common, p. 19; for more about the fire at the Bates and Hyde cotton gin concern and the explosion at the Bridgewater Iron Works see pages 7 and 6, respectively, in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910; for more about the blaze at the Congregational Church in Central Square see pages 8-9 in my essay on churches in Bridgewater through 1910; for more about the tin shop see pages 26-27 in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910.

recognized as one of the area's leading physicians but also appreciated for his contributions to the communal life of his adopted town, including his chairmanship of the school committee and his foremanship of the Fire District. Its only station in these years was located almost next door to Sawyer's house on 28 School Street, a dwelling, still extant, where Dr. Calvin Barton Pratt had conducted his medical practice in the middle of the nineteenth century. Among others who made substantive comments at the 1884 Fire District meeting were Joshua E. Crane, whose history of Bridgewater had just been published, Reverend Theodore F. Wright, pastor of the New Jerusalem Church from 1870 to 1889 and a leading light in the building of the Bridgewater Public Library in the early 1880's, and Chief Engineer Ford, who "spoke in terms of praise of the fire company." Perhaps the "slight remark by one of the speakers" at this particular meeting most appreciated by volunteers who bore the brunt of protecting the town against fires was the one that led to the decision to provide firefighters with "rubber coats."⁶

While remaining a voluntary and private organization, albeit with some town support, the Bridgewater Fire District made strides in the 1880's in its ability to protect the town from the ravages of fire. After relying on hand-operated fire engines for forty years, the District voted on August 5, 1883, to purchase a *Silby, No. 6*, a steam fire engine, marking, in Crane's words, "a new era in fire-extinguishing apparatus in town." At the same time, the acquisition of 1600 feet of new hose, when added to "a quantity of old that" was "in good condition," enabled this new engine "to throw a stream nearly a quarter of mile from the source of supply." This new engine, hose, and two hose carriages cost "\$ 4,380.00, hardly a small sum in those days. A few years later, the old style reel for carrying hose was replaced by a wagon which could accommodate up to four times more hose by laying it in tiers. Also of considerable significance in the late 1880's was the District's decision to make changes in its fire apparatus so as to allow horses, usually procured from the stable of Francis D. King in the rear of the Hyland House (the Bridgewater Inn in the 1890's) on the eastern side of Central Square, to haul it to the scene of a fire. Concurrent with the need of new equipment and horses was the constant necessity of having a reliable source of water to douse blazes of varying intensity. With Bridgewater not willing to support a publicly-owned water works system at this point and the Fire District not in a position to do so, this town and East Bridgewater on June 9, 1887, signed a contract with a private outfit known as the Bridgewater Water Company to build and maintain a centralized water system serving both communities, with operations located on Bridgewater's highest point, Sprague Hill, just to the east of the corner of Broad and High Streets. A full account of this water service will be given in a separate essay, but its usefulness to the Bridgewater Fire District was apparent from the beginning, as evidence by the 1890 town meeting's

⁶ BI, Jan. 11, 1884, Oct. 17, 24, 1885, Jan. 1, 1887, March 10, 1888, Nov. 28, Dec. 26, 1891, Sept. 4, 1896, Sept. 9, 1898, Jan. 9, 16, 1925; Crane, pp. 804, 809, 810, 812; Bridgewater Book; Pratt, "The First One Hundred Years;" "Pratt, Calvin Barton, (M.D.)--Physician," "Wright, Theodore Francis, 1845 to 1907 --Minister," HH, pp. 274-275, and 280, respectively; for more on Lewis G. Lowe see pages 36-37 in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910; Townscape Institute, Form 158, pp. 385-386; the house on School Street occupied by Drs. Pratt and Sawyer was later owned by Dr. Alfred F. Hunt who practiced in Bridgewater for over fifty years; among other contributions to the town's well-being were his chairmanship of the Board of Health between 1910 and 1955 and membership or chairmanship of the School Committee for thirty-five years; Darius Ford married Jessie Estes, daughter of Calvin Estes, in 1891; the couple lived in house on the northern end of Central Square on Summer

appropriation of \$1,050, to be paid to the water company for hydrant service. (Unlike the fire fighting service, the water works would remain in private hands until 1925.)⁷

Before citing some of the more critical fires which menaced Bridgewater in the 1880's and early 1890's, the first experiment in creating a fire alarm system in the town merits some attention, especially since no mention of it is found in the available secondary sources. While the third chronology, 1865 to 1976, in History Highlights, and Pratt's essay, covering fire fighting in Bridgewater between 1844 and 1944, both correctly cite the Town's Fire Department's installation of an alarm system in 1896, they fail to mention an earlier effort to formalize the sounding of fire alarms. In the middle of October 1885, the newly-formed Bridgewater Improvement Society (not to be confused with the Bridgewater Improvement Association formed in the early 1900's and still going strong a century later) looked into the feasibility of an electric fire alarm. Dr. Lowe, a member of the Society's committee on this matter, reported that its members concluded such a plan "was found to be impossible on account of the heavy expenses." On the other hand, he suggested, a "bell of 500 pounds with hanging complete could be secured for \$128, and with the necessary tower need not cost over \$200." Dr. Sawyer, also a member of the committee, hoped that such a bell would only be used for fires and be placed in a tower next to the School Street engine house and built high enough to accommodate the District's hoses. Since these two active citizens, as we have noted, were also committed to the work of the Fire District, it is not surprising that the fire alarm issue was on the agenda of its annual meeting held on October 20.⁸

It was generally agreed at this gathering that there was "no system" for sounding the alarm. When a fire occurred on the "outskirts" of the town's center, word had to be sent into the School Street station and "some one found to ring the bell...." Consequently, "much valuable time" was lost, and, in some cases, many members of the company had not known about a fire until the steamer had already left the station. There were, however, some differences expressed over the expense of creating an alarm system, especially as it related to building of a separate bell tower next to the School Street station. Stating the views of the Bridgewater Improvement Society, Dr. Lowe supported the purchase of a bell and the building of a tower to accommodate it. Advocating economy, Zebulon Pratt, a native of nearby Middleboro who had moved to Bridgewater in 1873 and had built a "well-crafted Italianate" house, which passersby can still appreciate, on the corner of South Street and what is now Maple Avenue, thought that the bells of the Central Congregational Church on Central Square "would be sufficient" for an alarm system. Somewhat modifying his comments at the recent meeting of the Improvement Society, Dr. Sawyer supported the placing of the alarm apparatus in the church tower with the understanding that the fire bell would have a distinct sound so as to not be confused with the church ones. With a consensus

Street, once the residence of Artemas Hale, who died in 1882.

⁷ BI, April 4, May 9, 1884, Oct. 17, 24, 1885, Jan. 16, March 20, April 10, May 15, June 19, Nov. 20, Dec. 4, 1886, Jan. 28, Feb. 18, 1888, March 8, 22, 1890, March 15, 1901; Pratt, "The First Hundred Years," Crane, p. 810; Moran, "Water and Sewer Department," "Fire Department," HH, pp. 53 and 58, respectively; see page 5 of this essay on the use of horses by the Fire District; for more about King's stable see page 35 in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910; Tales Around the Common, pp 19-20.

⁸ BI, Oct. 17, 1885.

reached on the less expensive approach, a motion was passed to create a committee of three, consisting, of Dr. Sawyer, D. C. Ford, and Alexander Dove, all of whom had “taken a great interest” in perfecting an alarm system, to report back to the District with a workable alarm plan that could be installed for about one hundred dollars.⁹

Within a month, the committee, working within the allotted funds and receiving no personal compensation, was well along in its efforts to devise a “simple” but workable fire alarm for the Fire District. On November 21, The Bridgewater Independent, reporting that the “stretching of the wires” between the church and the engine house had begun, succinctly wrote: “The system is entirely of home invention and construction. It consists...of a clockwork set in the tower of the Central Square church, by which the alarm is struck on the bell. This is set off by simply turning a crank in the engine house, which, by the action of a magnet, releases a clutch which holds the clockwork, the hammer of which rapidly strikes the bell for ten to twenty minutes.” Adding to the effectiveness of the system was the placing of gongs in houses of the fire engineers, the voluntary firemen, and King’s stable and the house of its driver, all of which could be “rung by the one turn of the crank at the engine house.” In March of 1886, as the new alarm was close to being perfected, the Independent presented its readers with a more sophisticated description of how the apparatus worked, including references to electricity, the use of which was about to make its debut in Bridgewater. On May 7, 1887, this newspaper optimistically reported that the “fire alarm is now in excellent working condition,” adding that it was “a peculiar one,” with probably “none other like it in the state.” Until 1896, this alarm system, devised by three civic-minded citizens at the cost of one-hundred dollars, would be used to alert this small community of around 4,000 inhabitants to the outbreak of fires, small and large.¹⁰

During its last ten years, the Bridgewater Fire District, aided by a new steam engine, a “homemade” fire alarm system, the use of horses, and the establishment of a private centralized water system in the town, including a steady increase in the number of hydrants, sought not only to protect various structures whose owners paid for this service, but also properties outside of its official jurisdiction. No attempt will be made here to discuss the many smaller fires in these years, including one that caused \$200 worth of damage to the “type and other fixtures” in the office of the Bridgewater Independent, at the time located on Broad Street, as disastrous as some of them were for individual property owners. Perhaps folks in the town were heartened to hear in May of 1887 that in some recent fires the volunteer fighters, thanks in part to the new alarm system, had been in “their places on the steamer and carriages in eight minutes from the sounding of the first alarm...” “quick work,” commented the Independent, “for a call department in a country town.”¹¹

Coping with several large fires of greater note proved more problematic, however. On the calm

⁹ BI, Oct. 17, 24, 1885, March 20, 1886, May 7, 1887, March 13, 1917; Townscape Institute, Form 218, pp. 511-512; in the early 1900’s the section of Spring Hill Avenue that ran to Bedford Street became Maple Avenue; then in 1917 Maple Avenue was extended from Bedford Street to what had been known as Sargent corner on South Street; at the same time Spring Hill Avenue was officially extended to Worcester Street and the underdeveloped section beyond.

¹⁰ BI, Nov. 21, 1885, Dec. 26, March 20, 1886, May 7, 1887; Census of Massachusetts, 1905, Vol. I, p. 819.

¹¹ BI, May 7, 1887, March 3, 1888, March 22, 1890.

summer morning of July 7, 1883, within thirty-six hours of Hollis M. Blackstone becoming its superintendent, the wooden structures of what was then known as “The State Workhouse” at Bridgewater were consumed by a disastrous conflagration. Brockton and Taunton, two larger neighbors of Bridgewater, responded by “sending their firefighters and apparatus on flatcars, supplied by the Old Colony Railroad.” The volunteers of Bridgewater Fire District tried to do their part by getting “the gallant little horse-drawn *Ousamequin* pumper to the scene of the fire, several miles south of the School Street station. Unfortunately, at least for the image and reputation of the company, the horse died half way to the Workhouse, and the engine, which had already served Bridgewater for over thirty years, had to be “dragged the rest of the way by the firemen themselves.” ¹²

Not nearly as disastrous as the Workhouse blaze, the fire that damaged the Masonic block on April 16, 1884, and was thought to be incendiary, deserves, nonetheless, some comment since it illustrates a great deal about the status of firefighting in Bridgewater in the 1880’s. This mid-nineteenth century wooden building on the western side of Central Square was purchased by Fellowship Lodge, Bridgewater’s oldest Masonic order, in 1869, four years after the Civil War had ended. Originally two stories, a third floor was added in 1872 and served as a meeting hall for the lodge. At the time of the fire, the first two floors were occupied by the dry goods enterprise of Thomas W. Crocker, already known as an important merchant in Bridgewater. From his residence just to the east of the Masonic block, Crocker’s two daughters, sighted smoke coming from the Lodge’s building about four o’clock in the morning. Not only was Crocker concerned about the stock in his store, but also the fire’s threat to his old wooden house, historically known as the Mitchell Keith House, which he had purchased in the early 1870’s. A general alarm was given on the bell of the nearby Central Square Congregational (the District’s mechanical alarm would not be in use for another year or so), and the new steamer, making its debut, was “rapidly drawn to the Town pump” on the “Little Common,” situated in front of Cole’s apothecary on northeastern corner of Central Square. “Poor, old *Ousamequin*,” commented one onlooker, “stood alone and deserted in the middle of the street, a most disconsolate looking thing. The new steamer took the shine all off of it.” With Bridgewater still four years away from a centralized water system, the volunteers operating this new engine were fortunate in finding the cisterns at this end of the Square full, allowing three lines of hose to send “a perfect cataract of water...into the burning building.” The firemen, many of whom complained about not having rubber coats, were praised for their quick response to the fire and their successful efforts in confining it to the Masonic block. This property of the Fellowship Lodge sustained damage amounting to between \$1,000 and \$1,500, but had the blaze spread it could have wreaked havoc on the western side of the Square, where almost all the buildings were constructed of wood. Crocker’s loss was extensive,

¹² Arthur F. Kingsley, Jr. and Charles Gaughan, The History of the Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Bridgewater, “The State Workhouse,” pp. 5-6; Kingsley, a former Deputy Assistant Superintendent of the Addiction Center, was the main author of this unpublished account of the M. C. I., writing about the changes of this institution from the 1850’s, when it housed voluntary paupers, until it assumed its present name in 1955; Gaughan became the superintendent in 1959; HH, pp. 152-153; this latter source contains portions of the history of the M. C. I.; I have been told that Kingsley’s work is now available on a computer disc; at some point in my writing, I intend to comment at length on the history of this state institution, particularly the years from the late 1880’s to 1925; BJ, Jan. 4, 1884;



School Street Station, between 1883 and 1895
(Rizer Collection)

with almost all of his stock, valued at about \$13,000, being destroyed by “smoke and water.” Only \$8,000 of it was covered by insurance. By June, Crocker reopened his enterprise “at R. W. Wilbar’s old stand” in Central Square, but a few years later went into the insurance and real estate business, a vocation he pursued until his death in 1913.¹³

In 1887-1888, there were two other fires of some considerable consequence in the town which required the District’s attention. On September 7, 1887, the Unitarian Church on School Street, a short walk east of the Fire Station, was struck by lightning and badly damaged in what was described by one source as the “severest thunder storm ever” to hit Bridgewater. This 1845 beautiful wooden meeting house, designed by Architect Solomon K. Eaton, is the third and present one built on this site to serve the town’s oldest congregation of what is historically known as The First Parish. Three weeks after the fire, it was reported that the lightning rod had been “defective” and would “receive proper attention.” The chapel, erected about 1880, next to the church sanctuary, was insured for \$2,000, about its original cost. The second fire of some import occurred late on Saturday night of May 20, 1888. Someone passing through the center of Bridgewater noticed that dense smoke was emanating from the post office, located at this time in the old Keith block on the western side of Central Square. Within a short time, the fire company, aided by a hydrant, recently installed by the year-old Bridgewaters Water Company, and the *Silsby, No. 6* steam fire engine, was saturating the attic of the building where the fire had begun. The volunteer firemen were praised in their handling of the fire, considered to be “the most stubborn” they had “ever faced.” But when it was all over at one o’clock in the morning, “the building presented a sorry sight, fire and water having done their work well.” Damages to the building, which would continue to be owned by the Keith family until 1924, were covered by insurance with L. G. Lowe. Two of the block’s occupants, the jewelry business of Harry A. Clark and the barber shop of William H. Reiser, were also adequately covered by insurance with Lowe and were able to return to their quarters early in July. Fortunately for most folks in town, the “mail matter” in the Post Office was removed without much damage and for about three weeks could be picked up at the room of the nearby Social Club. After a short stay in the Mitchell Block on the other side of the Common., the Post Office returned to the western side of the Square to take up residence on the first floor of the brick Savings Bank Building where it would remain for the next thirty-five years. (Had the owners of the Keith block been willing to sell the property to some “men of means,” who were ready to replace it with a multi-storied, brick business block, the Post Office might have been housed there and, perhaps, still would be.)¹⁴

Crane, pp. 806-807; Pratt, “The First Hundred Years.”

¹³ *BI*, April 18, 25, May 2, 1884, June 6, 1885, June 18, 1887, Dec. 23, 1921, April 15, 1924; Pratt, “The First Hundred Years,” *The Townscape Institute*, Form 44, pp. 151-152; *HH*, pp. 200, 230; for more information on Thomas W. Crocker and the Masonic block see pages 19, 22-23, 37, and 99-100 in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910; this fire, as we shall see, was not the last one to threaten the Masonic building, which in 1967 was razed and replaced by the present Masonic Temple; as I have noted in my essay on stores and services, the word “block” was often used to describe a particular commercial property in Bridgewater instead of “building” in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

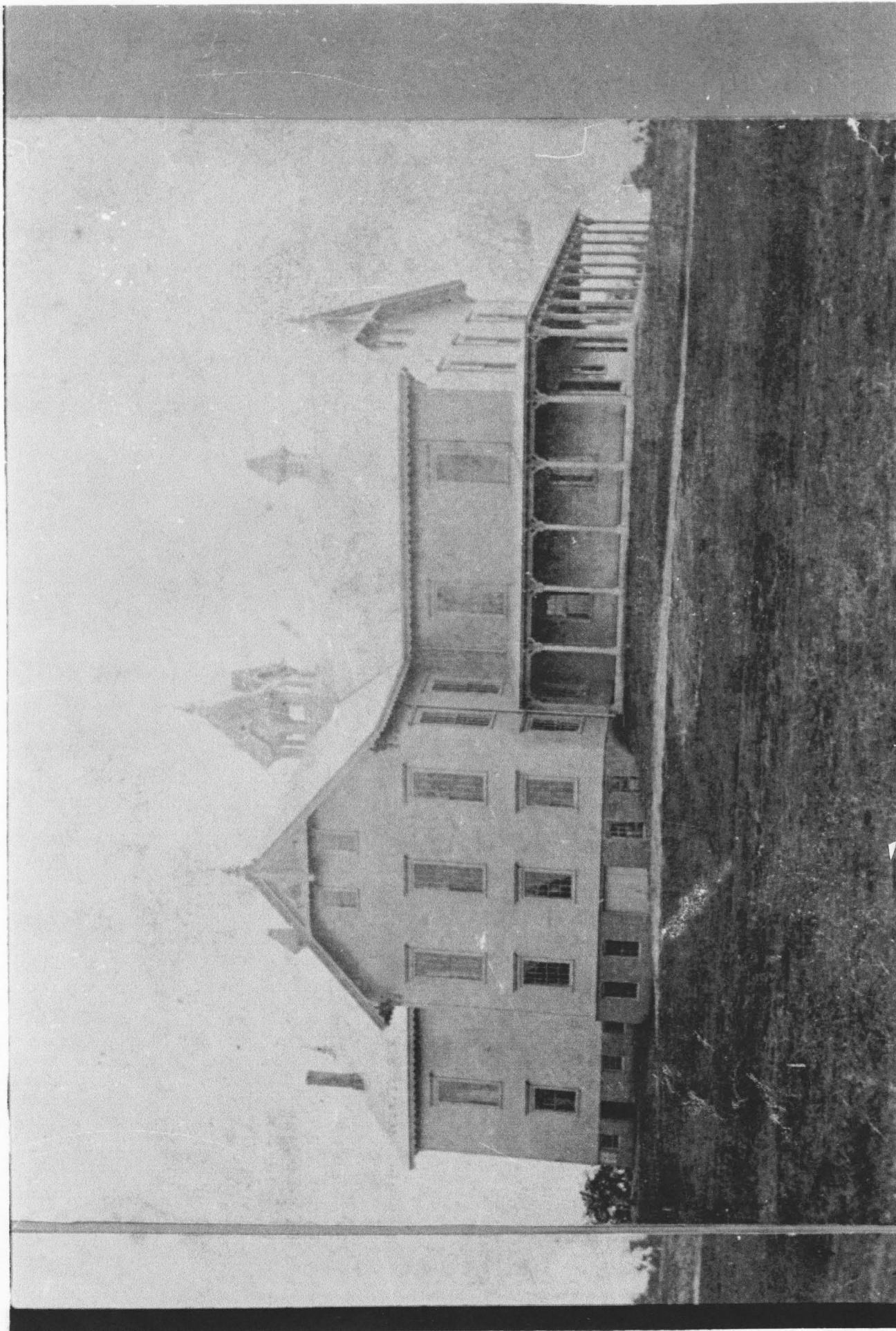
¹⁴ *BI*, Sept. 24, 1887, May 26, June 9, 16, July 7, 1888, Oct. 13, 1916, June 6, 1924; “Twenty Years Ago,” *BI*, July 15, 1910; “An accounting of its history as revealed by its records,” *The First Parish Unitarian Church Bridgewater, Massachusetts*, Written, Compiled and edited by Dorothy L. Mann and Anne H. Bates (Bridgewater, Massachusetts:

In 1891, three years before firefighting became a public service, two blazes, each in its own way, reminded folks in Bridgewater of the town's rural background. On Wednesday morning, February 11, a fire, starting in the chimney, "totally consumed" the old Harden building in Prattown, an eastern region of Bridgewater which had still retained much of its country appearance, despite some industrial activity at the juncture of the Town River and Plymouth Street. The property was owned by Benjamin Harden, a farmer and lumberman, and consisted of a grocery store, built by his father in the early nineteenth century and a hall, once "famous for good old dances," erected around thirty-five years later. It is not clear whether the fire department was called to put out the fire; it was reported, however, that "adjoining houses ...were saved through the efforts of neighbors and that fortunately Harden had recently secured additional insurance for "quite an addition to his stock." The other and last major fire to be fought by the Bridgewater Fire District occurred on July 27. Late in the afternoon of that summer day, the alarm was rung and the company headed to the fairgrounds of the Plymouth County Agricultural Society, an organization formed in 1819 and located off of Broad Street, along the Town River. Upon their arrival, the volunteers found the large and stately Agricultural Hall, built in 1856, with the two wings added later, engulfed in fire "so hot that it was impossible to get near it...." Greatly adding to the helplessness of the situation was the fact that the nearest hydrant was nearly 3,000 feet away at the Broad Street railroad crossing. Since this would have required all the hose at their disposal, the firemen "turned their efforts to saving the out buildings." The loss was estimated at \$17,000, \$7,000 of which was covered by insurance. This conflagration, which many thought was the work of an incendiary, added to a series of problems which had recently plagued the Society. Although this society was to survive for many years to come, its Bridgewater fairgrounds on Broad Street would cease to be the site of the annual fair beginning in the fall of 1899.¹⁵

A little more than two years after the fairground conflagration, the suggestion of having the town take over the fire service, while not a new one, began to be seriously considered. Among the property owners of the district, some of whom attended the annual meeting of the Fire District in November of 1893, there was a growing consensus that the time had come to move in this direction. Their main argument had little to do with the efficiency of the Fire District or its humane practice of responding to fires in the town's outlying areas not within the District's prescribed boundaries. Rather, they did not think it was fair to tax only the properties within the district when other parts of the town also benefited

Published By Bridgewater-Raynham Graphic Arts Department, 1976), pp.114, 116-117; "Unitarian Church 1717-," HH, Co-ordinated by Ethel M. and Donald E. Dolan, p. 64; HH, p.181; for readers wishing more information about the Unitarian Church see pages 2-5, 27-36, in my essay on churches in Bridgewater through 1910; for more about the Keith block see pages 18-20, 96, in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910; I have done considerable research on the Bridgewater Post Office through 1925 and hopefully in the future will write about this important institution.

¹⁵ BI, Feb., 14, Aug. 1, 1891, Jan, 13, 1894; Crane, pp. 805-806; Pratt, "The First Hundred Years," Pictorial History, 1987, pp. 46-47; HH, p.141; D. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, pp.47-49; "Harden, Benjamin, 1833 to 1905--Farmer, lumberman," HH, pp, 265 266; Harden was a charter member of the Bridgewater Grange, formed in January of 1894, and remained active in the organization until his death in 1905; at some point in my writing I plan to write an extensive essay on agriculture in Bridgewater to 1925, part of which will deal with the Plymouth Country Agricultural Society and the Bridgewater Grange.



Agricultural Hall, Plymouth County Agricultural Society
Off Broad Street
Fire, 1891
(Rizer Collection)

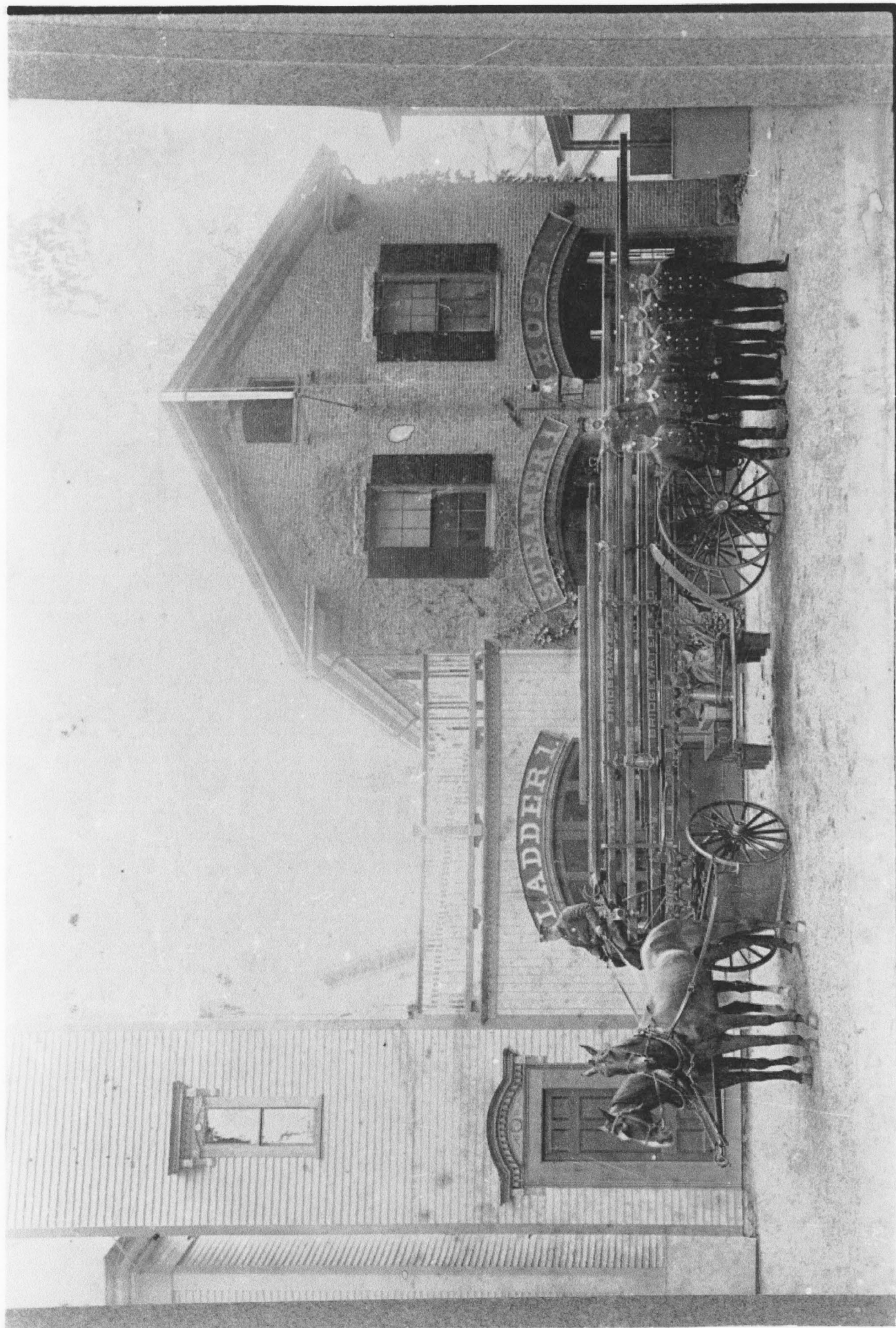
from this firefighting service. With considerable justice, these citizens also pointed out that their regular taxes increased when the town had to reimburse the Fire District for some of the expense of performing services in areas not in its official jurisdiction. The issue of private vs. public ownership of the fire service was complicated in 1893 by tension between the old and new property owners in the district, with recent homeowners raising “a kick” over the rise in assessments deemed necessary to pay the debt incurred by the district during the previous six years. Human nature being what it is, folks with homes or businesses not within the boundaries of the district were hardly elated about the idea of being assessed for fire protection, even though the private and voluntary Bridgewater Fire District had “never refused to go outside the district in case of fire....” With two-thirds to three-quarters of Bridgewater’s taxpayers living within the district, however, the Independent confidently predicted that “regardless of opposition,” the town meeting in March would vote to make fire fighting a public service.¹⁶

In early February of 1894, the Fire District voted to ask the town at its annual meeting to take over the property owned and maintained by the Fire District for the previous fifty years. In preparation for this move, a committee consisting of Chief Ford, Hosea Kingman, and Sillman Alger, who, after losing his leather business in the big Boston fire in 1872, had run a farm on Main Street in Bridgewater, was appointed to prepare a plan for conveying the property to the town. By order of the district, its clerk submitted an article to be placed in the town warrant which read: “To see if the town will accept the option offered it by the fire district, of transfer and conveyance of all properties of said district, on conditions to be mutually agreed upon.” While there was some opposition, the town voted overwhelmingly for the Article, listed as number Ten, which in effect created a town fire department. A committee consisting of Henry O. Little, owner of a box factory at the corner of Plymouth and Spring Streets, Edward E. Keith, and George M. Hooper, who operated a brickyard on Plymouth Street, was appointed to meet with the committee of the Fire District to make arrangements for a smooth transfer of property. Things went well, and, quoting from Pratt’s “The First Hundred Years”: “On April 2, 1894, by vote of the town, and the Bridgewater Fire District, deeds were passed conveying the assets of the district to the town, and the Bridgewater Fire district passed into history. From that date, the Fire Department [still with a volunteer crew] became a branch of town government, with William S. Prophett, serving as the first Chief Engineer under the new Regime.”¹⁷

Prophett, who at the time of his appointment, was associated with his father William in the furniture and undertaking business on the eastern side of Central Square, next to the Town Hall and a minute’s walk to the fire station on School Street. During his five-year tenure as the Chief Engineer of Bridgewater Fire Department, several steps were taken to increase the town’s ability to fight fires. At the town meeting in March 1895, thanks to Prophett’s prodding, a small sum of money was appropriated for the construction of a building for the hook and ladder truck that had been first used by the Fire District in

¹⁶ BI, Nov. 11, 18, 1893, Feb. 3, 1894.

¹⁷ BI, Feb. 3, 10, March 17, 31, 1894, Jan. 16, 1914; Pratt, “The Hundred First Years;” among other contributions to Bridgewater’s civic and economic life, Alger was one the selectmen who in the mid-1890’s played a role in bringing the trolleys to this town; “Hooper, George M., 1838 to 1909--Manufacturer,” HH, p. 266.



School Street Station, ca. 1900
Hook and Ladder
(Rizer Collection)



School Street Fire Station, ca. 1900
Hose Wagon
(Rizer Collection)

the late 1880's. Located between the Town Hall and the 1858 School Street station, which housed the steamer purchased in 1883, the new structure, for which George P. Haywood did the carpentry work, measured "17x46, with one side of it being the brick wall of the steamer house." In April, soon after this new addition to the fire department was finished, the truck was moved there from the King's carriage house in back of the Bridgewater Inn. Prophett now hoped the truck would be the first piece of equipment to arrive at the scene of fire, helping the volunteer firemen "to do more and better work than...in the past." Two more steps were taken in the following year to provide the town with better fire protection. A more sophisticated fire alarm system than the one used in the 1880's by the district was initiated when a "striker was placed in the tower of the Central Congregational Church" and "operated by a push button at the fire station." On Friday night, June 13, a new hose tower, occupying the narrow space between the Town Hall and the recently built truck and ladder house, was "appropriately dedicated," with "a pleasing entertainment" and "an excellent collation" adding to the occasion.¹⁸

On a more somber note, two significant industrial fires occurred in 1898, the fourth year of Prophett's five year term. Located between Hale and Spring Streets, not far from where Plymouth Street intersected with the railroad tracks of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford line, a wooden shoe factory, run by William H. McElwain since 1894, was completely destroyed on February 3, 1898. When asked, McElwain said he had no idea of the fire's origin, but stated that the general impression of those with some knowledge of the situation was that spontaneous combustion was to blame. While the factory books were generally burned beyond recognition, those proving the concern's insurance coverage were saved by "a great effort on the part of the fire department..." It would be a bit of a stretch to characterize this blaze, which resulted in a loss of \$75,000 in machinery and merchandise and \$12,000 in damage to the mill, as a blessing in disguise. But so important had the McElwain enterprise become for Bridgewater's economy, including two to three hundred jobs, a public drive was started to raise funds for the construction of a new and much larger wooden factory between tracks of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad, and what would soon be Perkins Street, connecting Broad and Pearl Streets. Wisely, about the time the new factory opened in June, a new hydrant was installed close by, either on "private property, or perhaps more properly on the proposed new street there." By the early 1900's, the McElwain shoe firm was Bridgewater's largest employer. Its large wooden "home" still reminds the town that it once had a thriving shoe industry.¹⁹

¹⁸ BI, Feb. 3, 1894, March 23, April 6, 1895, June 20, 1896, Jan. 20, Feb. 17, 1899; Pratt, "The First Hundred Years;" "Prophett, William Spiers, 1858 to 1932--Funeral director, Fire Chief," HH, p. 276; HH, p. 181; D. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, pp.109-114; pictures in this latter sources present a pretty good idea of changes in the property of the Fire Department on School Street between 1858 and the 1930's; "Accepted Streets," Town of Bridgewater, p. 11; it should be pointed out that Francis D. King, who had moved his stables to the eastern side of Central Square in the 1880's, passed away in July of 1896; in its waning days the Bridgewater Fire District had done a study of the feasibility of a new fire alarm system, containing about seven boxes at a cost of about \$1900.

¹⁹ BI, Feb.11, June 10, Sept 9, 1898, Feb. 17, 1899; The McElwain Stride, Vol. I, No. 4, Jan. 1921, p. 4; this latter source was found in the files of the Bridgewater Public Library; Pratt, "The First One Hundred Years;" Townscape Institute, Form 155, pp. 379-380; "McElwain, William Howe, 1867-1908--Manufacturer," HH, pp. 271-272; for more on McElwain's shoe manufacturing enterprise, see pp. 24-27, 30-31, and 33-43, in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910.

Seven months after the shoe factory fire, another blaze dealt a blow to Bridgewater's economy. On the evening of September 7, 1898, citizens in the center of the town heard the sound of the recently installed alarm system, warning of a fire on Plymouth Street. It did not take long for a crowd to head in that direction and soon discover that the factory of the Bridgewater Box Company, erected in 1890, on the corner of Plymouth and Spring Streets, was the "endangered building." Rather ironically, the original investors of this company, including Henry O. Little, had helped finance the construction of the nearby shoe factory which had gone up in flames earlier in the year. With plenty of orders on hand, it had been a busy day at the factory, and as William Bassett, a member of the firm, which had been recently re-organized, was returning to his home on Broad Street, he heard the alarm and immediately headed back to the scene of the fire. He was soon engaged in "valiant service directing the firemen and assisting in saving some of the office supplies." From the start, however, problems dogged the firefighting efforts, most notably the initial lack of effective water pressure from a nearby hydrant on Plymouth Street. Thankfully, noted the Independent, the steam engine, which some voters at the last annual town had advocated selling, was at hand to help out. Taking a balanced view, this local newspaper, while agreeing that the fire, which might have been started by "a hot box" close to a sawing machine, revealed "many weak points...in apparatus, management,etc.," went on to say "that the firemen did the very best they could with what they had to do with." By "the time the all-out signal was rung at 11 o'clock" that night, the "entire factory, which was filled to overflowing with lumber and finished work, was burned to the ground." The total loss amounted to \$22,000, \$15,000 of which was covered by insurance. On a more optimistic note, some observed that had the new McElwain shoe mill been erected on the Hale Street site of the one destroyed the preceding February, it too most likely would have been burned. One suspects that the thirty men who worked for the box company and the local farmers who sold their spare lumber to it found little solace in this observation. Unlike McElwain's, which was already thriving in its new home further west along the railroad tracks, the Bridgewater Box Company in 1900 petitioned the Superior Court for the right to dissolve.²⁰

Owing to added business responsibilities, William S. Prophett, who had taken over the proprietorship of the Central Square furniture and undertaking establishment, following the death of his father William in 1897, announced in February of 1899 that he would "positively decline to serve as Chief Engineer," after his term expired on April 1. About a month later it was reported that the assistant chief engineers, who were appointed by the selectmen, would select from their ranks Elijah B. Gammons to head the Fire Department. During his year or so in this position, two significant changes effected Bridgewater's firefighting service. After debating the issue for two years, the town decided to purchase its own teams of horses for the department, a move prompted by death of F. D. King in 1896 and the subsequent sale of his estate's horses. The Frank M. Washburn barn, located to the rear of the School

²⁰ BI, Sept. 9, 1898; reading the detailed account of the fire in this local newspaper, I feel compelled to remind my readers of just how important this source is to my research; Pratt, "The First Hundred Years;" "Little, Walter Sweet, 1873 to 1962--Merchant," HH, p. 271; for more on the Bridgewater Box Company see pages 27-28 in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910; it might be noted that Henry O. Little severed his connection to

Street engine house, was chosen as the site to house the town horses and was “refitted in a first-class manner,” allowing drivers to “sleep on the second floor and be in readiness for a fire.” The other major development was the extension of the fire alarm system during the tenure of Bridgewater’s first superintendent of this service, George Henry, a native of Canada and since the middle 1890’s the proprietor of a jewelry store in the Elwell Block on the eastern side of Central Square. Well-known as a watch repairer, builder of “Old English Clocks,” electrician, and general “tinkerer,” he was more than qualified for this position. From his home on Cedar Street, he had quick access to the fire station on School Street and the Central Square Congregational Church, which figured prominently in Bridgewater’s fire alarm system installed in 1896. Adding to the effectiveness of fire protection during his tenure was the increase in the number of hydrants and fire alarm boxes, especially in the town’s center.²¹

Three fires of note took place in 1899. In April, a big forest fire in the eastern part of Bridgewater on Great Hill, an elevation of 157 feet resulting from glacial deposition, “burned over an area of about one square mile,” before being extinguished through “the efforts of about a dozen or fifteen men living in that neighborhood” and the help of a “delightful shower....” (At this point, I don’t know what role was played, if any, by the regular fire department in combating this fire.) About a month later, a blaze, labeled by the Bridgewater Independent as a “BAD FIRE!,” heavily damaged the Joseph L. Bassett House, built around 1860, on Summer Street. This dwelling had been remodeled after the death of Bassett in 1896 by his son J. Gardner, already known for his work as the master of the Bigelow School in South Boston and contributor to the civic and economic life of Bridgewater. Most likely caused by a defective hearth, the fire was “a blind one,” with most of it initially occurring within the “walls, partitions, and ceilings until they were one mass of burning coals....” Perhaps had a series of errors not sent the firefighters to the wrong location at first, they might have prevented the house from becoming “a complete wreck.” Nevertheless, while the insurance did not cover the damages incurred, Bassett decided to hire John H. Ball, who had earlier remodeled the dwelling, to reconstruct this house, which, along with its immediate neighbor to the east, the 1902 First Baptist Church, still graces that part of Summer Street, not far from Central Square. The third blaze, doubtless of incendiary origin, totally destroyed the John Howard Industrial Home in the southern part of town on an early Saturday morning in late November. This house, known to many as the old Seth Washburn place, was nearly a century old, and since 1890 had been occupied by a society devoted to helping discharged prisoners of Bridgewater State Farm “lead lives of honesty and thrift.” None of the dozen or so inmates in residence at the time were suspected of starting the fire and were praised for working “heroically in their efforts to save the movable objects in the house from the flames.” (Again, my research does not indicate whether or not the town’s fire department aided in putting out this blaze.)²²

Bridgewater Box Company several months before it was destroyed by fire.

²¹ BI, Dec. 21, 1895, Dec. 2, 1898, Feb. 17, March 17, May 7, 1899, June 15, 1900, March 21, 1902; Pratt, “First Hundred Years;” for more information on George Henry, who left Bridgewater in 1902, see pages 11-12 in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910.

²² BI, May 2, 1896, April 28, May 26, June 9, Dec. 1, 1899, Nov. 6, 1914, Dec. 3, 1915; Lynn Hayden Furlong, “Bridgewater’s Environment,” HH, pp. 15-16; Townscape Institute, Form 246, pp. 567-568; for more on J. Gardner



School Street Fire Station, ca. 1900
(Rizer Collection)

Both continuity and change characterized Bridgewater's efforts at the turn of the century to protect citizens and property from the danger of fire. Townsfolk were well aware that fire protection had been a public responsibility since 1894 and that the 1857 fire house on School Street, once operated by the private Bridgewater Fire District, had been joined quite recently by smaller structures to accommodate the hook and ladder truck, hoses, and town-owned horses employed to haul equipment to the scene of a fire. Property owners throughout the town were especially appreciative of the first Town Fire Alarm System, adopted in 1896, and, which by 1900, boasted seven signal boxes and four miles of wire used to alert the Fire Department in case of trouble. Equally important at the start of the new century were the thirty-nine hydrants, paid for by the town but installed by the privately-owned Bridgewaters Water Company. While there was a general understanding of the need to replace the aging 1883 fire steam engine and to continue adding hydrants and fire alarm boxes so that the entire town would be served by the Fire Department, voters continued to wrestle with the never-ending dilemma of balancing legitimate requirements with the town's perceived inability to finance all undertakings at once.²³

There was, however, a major development in 1900 which added to the effectiveness of the Fire Department without increasing in any appreciable way the town's budget. On September 14, the Independent informed its readers that "Bridgewater is to have a steam fire gong that will announce in no uncertain tones the location of any fire that may break out." Despite improvements in its fire alarm system since 1896, the expense of installing such a device had "been thought impractical ...owing to the great expense for steam." Thanks, however, to the "enterprise" of the department's engineers and the generosity of W. H. McElwain & Co., whose shoe factory on Perkins Street was now the workplace for the largest number of town's inhabitants, a deal was reached to provide Bridgewater with a "strictly up-to-date...fire alarm." In place of the alarm located in the steeple of the Central Square Church, the parties agreed to the installation of "an 8-inch steam chime whistle on the roof of the McElwain factory, which will blow in unison with the striking of the bell in the tower of the fire engine house," on School Street. At "an expense of only a few dollars," George Henry, the Superintendent of the Bridgewater Fire Alarm, described as a "mechanical genius," was able to remove the old striker at the church and fit it "to pull the valve that will blow the new whistle..." Agreeing "to furnish steam free of charge at all times when they had the steam up for their own use," McElwain, having witnessed the destruction in 1898 of his first wooden factory between Spring and Hale Street, was motivated in part by self-interest since his new mill on Perkins Street was wooden too and more than vulnerable to fire. Many of the town's volunteer firefighters worked in his shoe factory and would now have no trouble responding to the new steam whistle. Along with many townsfolk, including the engineers of the Fire Department, McElwain was also undoubtedly aware that his enterprise was only part of the "large amount of valuable property," especially in the form of foundries and factories, that constituted what had become "practically the center"

Bassett see pages 27, 30, 34, 70 in my essay on education in Bridgewater through 1910 and pages 64-67 in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910.

²³ BI, March 16, April 20, May 18, 1900; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1900, pp. 60-64; Pratt, "The First Hundred Years."

of Bridgewater's industrial development. On a lighter note, at least for the town's youth, the Superintendent of Schools, William H. Sanderson, was given the privilege of choosing a signal announcing the school cancellation because of stormy weather. Only the most devoted "scholars" objected to that sound!²⁴

As had been the case since the establishment of the Fire District in 1844, the cost of fighting fires in Bridgewater continued to be kept in check by the voluntary nature of this important town service. Neither John Mayo, the Chief Engineer, nor the four Assistant Engineers received compensation for overseeing the work of the Fire Department. The thirty-two volunteers of the School Street station, twelve of whom manned the hook and ladder truck, did not constitute a permanent or professional fighting force. They were paid, nevertheless, a modest hourly wage for the time actually fighting a fire and a lesser amount for taking part in practice sessions. After denying request of petitioners in 1899 that a company of volunteers be formed in "some outlying district" to operate the old fire engine, *Ousamequin*, permission to create such a force in Scotland, an area in southwestern Bridgewater, was granted by the Department's engineers the following year. This company of twelve men would have to wait another year before the town appropriated \$200 for the erecting of a structure to house this antiquated piece of equipment. A Fire Police Force of twelve men was also part of the Fire Departments personnel. At this point, I'm not sure if they were paid for their important services, although the town had a longstanding policy of hiring special "police" to aid in policing particular events such as the summer band concerts.²⁵

Reporting only seven fires, the Fire Department was not particularly busy in 1900. In early April there were some brush and forest fires, including one near the Wilber ice houses on Carver's Pond and another of a more serious nature that burned over twenty-five acres of pasture and woodland in Prattown, an eastern section of the town. On Sunday morning July 15, the fire volunteers responded to a blaze at the brick yard of George M. Hooper & Co., located near the Town River, not far east of the intersection of Plymouth and Spring Streets. The loss was estimated at \$1200, a fairly substantial amount, considering the company had no insurance. Perhaps Hooper's officials read with chagrin an ad that appeared a week later in the Bridgewater Independent in which James F. Charnock, an agent of New York Life, warned readers about fire and "to avoid the danger of being Caught without protection."²⁶

Bridgewater's Firefighting Service-1901-1910

As the population of Bridgewater grew from around 6,000 in 1901 to over 7,600 in 1910, including increases in those parts the town some distance from the village center, it was only natural to

²⁴ BI, Sept. 14, Oct. 5, 12, 1900; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1900, p. 63; Pratt, "The First Hundred Years;" for more on William H. Sanderson see the appropriate parts of my essay on education in Bridgewater through 1910; for more about McElwain's shoe enterprise see pages 24-27, 30-31, and 33-43 in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910.

²⁵ BI, Oct. 13, 1899; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1900, pp. 60-64; Pratt, "The First Hundred Years."

²⁶ BI, April 13, July 20, 27, 1900; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1900, p. 62; for more about the Hooper brick yard see pages 21, 33, and 62 in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910; for more about

see an expansion of the town's firefighting service. During these years, for instance, the operational budget of the Fire Department went from \$1,500 to \$3,500. This increase, however, was accompanied by little innovation in how fire protection was provided to the town's inhabitants. Throughout the decade, voters at town meetings were unwilling to support the purchase of a new and up-to-date fire engine or the building of a new facility on School Street to replace the brick one erected in the 1850's. Despite the town's ownership and operation of the Fire Department since 1894, the work of this vital public service continued to be carried on by dedicated volunteers; this would not change until the 1920's. Housed in a town stable behind the fire station on School Street, horses were still used, as they had been since the 1880's, to haul the hose and ladder truck and the steamer to a fire scene. Mechanization of the Fire Department would not begin until 1915. The existence of major wooden structures, including commercial establishments in Central Square, churches on Bedford, Cedar, School, and Summer Streets and on the Square, and factories, many which were in the industrial area along the railroad tracks not far from the town's center, made the possibility of disastrous conflagrations ever present. While Bridgewater with its twenty-eight square miles was not a large town, some outlying areas, including Titicut and Prattown, were several miles away from the School Street Station and were hardly first in line to benefit from the extension of the water system begun in 1887 by the privately owned and operated Bridgewater Water Company. Even the Scotland area, which in the early 1900's acquired its own company of volunteer firemen and received town funds to build a small fire station to house the old Ousamequin engine, was not yet connected to the town water system, a problem compounded by a lack of water at times in this southwestern area of Bridgewater.²⁷

For the most part, the organization of Bridgewater's firefighting system remained the same as before the turn of the century, albeit with personnel changes. Appointed by the town's selectmen, the official Fire Department was a board of engineers consisting of three to four members, who from its ranks elected a Chief Engineer. Among other tasks of the fire chief was writing the department's yearly report to be included in the annual town report. The engineers held monthly meetings in the engine house hall on School Street and had jurisdiction over most matters pertaining to this essential town service. While receiving no compensation for taking on this important civic responsibility, the engineers enjoyed the camaraderie of working together and such social gatherings as the annual ball sponsored by the department. One particularly enjoyable evening in June of 1902 found the members of "the Fire Department and their invited guests" enjoying a "sumptuous supper" at the Bridgewater Inn, a short walk from the fire station, provided by George J. Alcott, the hotel's proprietor since the fall of 1898. Of the speeches given at this affair, the most interesting one was an "account of the history of the department," by William S. Prophett, the first chief to head the fire service when it became a town responsibility in 1894.²⁸

James F. Charnock see pages 110-111 in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910.

²⁷ BI, March 8, 1901; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1901, p. 89; "Selectmen's Report," Annual Town Report, 1902, p. 36; 1910, p.30; United States Census, 1910, Vol. VI., p. 91.

²⁸ BI, Feb. 8, Dec. 20, 1901, June 27, 1902.

The Fire Department was headed by three men from 1901 to 1913. Replacing John Mayo, Adrian Z. Pratt, hailing from one of Bridgewater's "old" families and the respected custodian of the town's high school located in the Academy building in Central Square, was chosen the fire chief on May 1, 1901, and was aided by assistant engineers, Mayo, Eustace Sturtevant, George Witherell, and Fred C. Pratt, who served as the board's clerk. Defending Chief Pratt's insistence that a carriage should be "in waiting for him at the engine house" to convey him to a fire in a timely fashion, the Independent opined on July 5, 1901: "In a volunteer department it is necessary that the chief should be in good voice and physical condition when the work of fire fighting begins, and this he cannot be if he is obliged to run some distance." After serving only one year, A. Pratt gave up his position as fire chief. Two years later he also retired as janitor of the high school.²⁹

On April 28, 1902, the board of fire engineers chose Fred C. Pratt to be the next chief, a position he held until May 1, 1905. A seasoned fireman, he had joined the company of volunteers in 1883, the year in which the private Bridgewater Fire District, under Chief Darius C. Ford, had taken an important step forward by purchasing a steam fire engine, "*Silsby*" No. 6." Before being appointed by the selectmen in 1895 to the board of engineers, Pratt "served in all the offices of the company" of volunteer firefighters. His long involvement in Bridgewater's fire service would help him cope with a feud, discussed below, between the board of engineers and some volunteers during his first summer as chief. Appreciating his hard work and skill in putting the town's firefighting organization "in fine shape," the members of the fire company presented him on his retirement as chief with "a handsome morris chair," accompanied by words of praise from their captain, John Cochrane. The board's decision on May 1 to select William Marshall as Pratt's successor was an excellent one. Known as an able firefighter, he had joined the department in 1894 and had gone on to serve "in the various grades, with the exception of that of 2d lieutenant." In recognition of his fine work as a volunteer, the selectmen had appointed him in 1902 to the board of engineers. Employed as a machinist at the Continental Gin Co., he was also noted for his stints as a constable and police officer, his regular attendance at Trinity Episcopal Church, and his commitment to a fraternal organization known as the Improved Order of Red Men, a branch of which was formed in Bridgewater in 1902, known as the Nippenickett Tribe No. 151. His untimely death at forty-three, caused by drowning on a fishing trip off the coast of nearby Plymouth in September of 1911, shocked and saddened the folks of Bridgewater, who realized they had lost an outstanding fire chief and, in the words of the Independent, "a representative citizen and a man who will be missed in every place where he was accustomed to move."³⁰

The volunteers who responded to and fought the fires had their own organizations: Company One of about twenty-five to thirty members at the School Street station and Company Two with around a third to half that number at the much smaller station in Scotland. Operating under their own constitutions and by-laws, the two companies held monthly and annual meetings and made decisions as to whom would

²⁹ BI, May 3, July 5, 1901, May 2, 1902; Pratt, "The First Hundred Years;" for more about Adrian Z. Pratt see p. 68 in my essay on education in Bridgewater through 1910.

be admitted to their ranks. Being the larger, Company One assigned its volunteers to man the Hook and Ladder or the Hose and Steamer and held regular practice sessions at such places as Carver Pond and Crescent, School, South, and Summer Streets. Among the more notable and popular volunteers was John Cochrane, father of future baseball Hall of Famer Gordon “Mickey” Cochrane. At their annual meeting on January 5, 1904, the members of Company One presented John “with a gold chain and Odd Fellow charm” in appreciation of the work he had done as captain of their organization. Three months later, the same company was saddened to hear that S. Clinton Gammons, who had been a “a fire company enthusiast all his life,” could no longer continue his firefighting service, since his “duties as superintendent of the Continental Gin works on Pearl Street” demanded “practically his whole attention....” Prior to being appointed an engineer in 1898, Gammons had been a “hoseman, pipeman, foreman of hook and ladder truck, and fireman....” Harry Gow was another well-thought of volunteer, who in January of 1908 at Company One’s annual meeting was unanimously re-elected captain of “Steamer No. 1.” Like the engineers, the volunteer firefighters enjoyed fraternizing with each other, aware of their collective commitment to protect the town from the ever-present danger of destructive fires. They also enjoyed the social events sponsored by their organization, including oyster suppers, dances, pool tournaments, and ladies nights. Who would have wanted to miss the annual firemen’s strawberry festival, culminating in a dinner served by the volunteers, with, of course, considerable help from their wives.³¹

For the most part, the engineers, appointed by the selectmen, and the volunteers had cordial relations, made possible by Bridgewater’s small-town nature and the fact that the engineers had been volunteers themselves before becoming part of the official Fire Department. A major exception to this state of harmony came in 1902, however. In July, a source of friction between the board and Company One, which had been festering since May, came to the surface, with the Independent announcing: “19 ‘FIRE LADDIES’ OUT.” The incident leading to this headline involved the resignation of the majority of volunteers, in protest to the board’s decision not to re-appoint one the volunteers, W. E. Thomas, as janitor of the engine house. Arguing the dispute could have been settled if the engineers had agreed to meet with the company, the protesters, including Thomas, were further incensed by the board’s refusal to give reasons for its action or heed a call for the resignation of two of the engineers. Instead, the board told the company that they would accept applications to fill the now vacant position. Four men did seek the position, with the board moving quickly to select John Cochrane from the list. While praising the company for “doing excellent work lately,” the Independent generally sided with the board, arguing that “the engineers are accountable to no one for their appointments....” and that discipline in the firefighting service could not be maintained if “those in authority are made to withdraw by those under them.” Perhaps such disputes were inherent in a firefighting system that was comprised of two organizations, an official board appointed by the selectmen and a company of volunteers, responsible for its own

³⁰ BI, March 21, May 2, 1902, April 7, 28, May 5, 1905, Sept. 29, 1911; Pratt, “The First Hundred Years.”

³¹ BI, Aug. 9, 23, 1901, Aug. 15, Nov. 7, Sept. 5, 1902, Feb. 20, March 6, Sept. 11, 1903, Jan. 8, April 8, May 13, July 1, 1904, March 3, 17, 1905, Dec. 27, 1907, Jan. 17, 1908, June 25, 1909; “Fire Department,” Annual Town Report, 1902, p. 96; 1903, p. 51; 1905, p. 42; for more about the Continental Gin Company and A. Clinton Gammons

membership. To the credit of both the engineers and the protesters, Bridgewater during 1902 Fourth of July week did not lack fire protection. The resigning firemen agreed to serve during this important holiday time and the engineers notified seventeen volunteers, although not members of Company One, that they would temporarily serve as “merely substitutes for those who have left the department.”³²

Whatever the long range impact, if any, of this dispute on Bridgewater’s fire service, its two basic organizations were soon functioning as usual in the remaining months of 1902. In late July and the middle of August, Company One held its regular practices, with chief Pratt expressing “himself as well pleased with the work of the men.” At its regular monthly meeting in September, the company chose new officers: “John J. Glenn, captain; John Cochrane, 1st lieutenant; Robert Marshall, 2d lieutenant; A. E. Brown, clerk and treasurer.” Ensuring that the company would have a sufficient number of volunteers, ten men were voted into its ranks and “eight new applications were received.” At the company’s November meeting, a committee was appointed to “make preparations for giving a supper to the engineers and a few invited guests,” suggesting that cordial relations with the board had been restored after the troubles in July. At a similar occasion a year later, to which town officials, ex-chiefs, and firemen from other towns were invited, Pratt, now in his second year as head of Bridgewater’s fire service and who had not mentioned the Fire Department’s troubles in his 1902 report to the town, most likely took special note of a short speech of Chief Lincoln of nearby Whitman in which he expressed his gladness in seeing “such harmony between the engineers and firemen in Bridgewater.”³³

If the Board of Engineers and the two companies of volunteers constituted the core of Bridgewater’s firefighting system, mention needs to be made of the valuable contributions of the other components of what had become a town service in 1894. Helping out at the scenes of fire was a Fire Police Force. Composed of anywhere from six to twelve members who were appointed by the selectmen, this organization held monthly and annual meetings in the School Street engine house. Taking their civic responsibility seriously, a number of well-known men were part of this auxiliary force. At the 1904 annual gathering, for example, Charles A. Wilbar, a member the fire police force since the early 1890’s and Bridgewater’s postmaster since 1898, was elected Captain; Jerome B. Rogers, proprietor of a hardware business on Broad Street and by the early 1900’s one of the town’s senior retailers, clerk and treasurer; Frank Williams, a proprietor of a grocery store, also on Broad Street, from 1894 to 1902, first sergeant; and George F. Witherell, second sergeant. Another component of the town’s efforts in fighting fires was a small number (four in 1906) of forest fire wardens who were appointed by the selectmen and whom citizens were asked to call on in case of forest or field fires. Neighborhood men most likely were asked by a warden to help quell such blazes. I am not sure if fire wardens were under the jurisdiction of the Fire Department, but Chief Marshall, in a letter to the Independent on March 6, 1906, informed the public to “never pull a [fire] box for a grass or wood fire,” since “Forest Fire Wardens” have charge of

see p. 57 in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910.

³² BI, July 4, 11, 18, Nov. 28, 1902; it should be noted that in late November several men, who had resigned in the summer, helped contain a fire on Cedar Street before the Department arrived.

³³ BI, July 25, Aug. 15, Sept. 5, Oct. 3, 17, Nov. 7, 14, 1902, Oct. 23, 1903; “Fire Department,” Annual Town Report,

such fires, are in position to cope with them successfully, and are ready to respond at all times....” He went on to say “the Fire Department, so called, is organized for entirely different work.” Making the same points in his 1906 annual report, Marshall added: “the growing popularity of the telephone service in the town can be used to reach Fire Wardens.”³⁴

While there was little innovation in how fires were fought in Bridgewater between 1901 and 1910, there was a steady increase in the number of hydrants and electrical fire alarms, two important aspects of the firefighting system. Thanks to town appropriations and the work of the Bridgewater Water Company, established in 1887 and privately-owned until 1925, the town had sixty-six hydrants by 1910, a number achieved by adding a few each year. Since the southern and eastern parts of Bridgewater still lacked town water, the hydrants were not uniformly spread throughout the town. Providing an auxiliary supply of water, the number of cisterns, although well-maintained by the town, remained at four and were all located in the village center, not surprisingly since most of the structures in Central Square were wooden and close-together. (These reservoirs would prove inadequate during the devastating conflagrations of the 1920’s.) Equally important was the extension of the electrical fire alarm system, an explanation of which was dutifully printed each week by the Bridgewater Independent. In 1910, there were twenty-two signal boxes in the town, more than twice the number of 1902. Alarms had been placed on the corners of such streets as High and Main, Plymouth and Hayward, and Pleasant and Crescent and at the Broad Street railroad depot and the new White shoe factory on Spring Street. In addition, the signal box at the Normal School had been connected to the town’s fire alarm system. Bridgewater continued to rely on the steam-powered fire whistle at the McElwain shoe factory on Perkins Street, with the town appropriating funds in 1903 for an overhaul of this apparatus. Louise Dickinson Rich, who came to Bridgewater in 1905 when her father James H. became the editor of the Bridgewater Independent, reminisced fifty years later in Innocence Under the Elms: “When a fire broke out, the bell in the fire station tower and the whistle of one of the shoe factories sounded alternately, ‘Dang-hoo! Dang-hoo’ in a clarion tocsin that could be heard all over town and miles out into the country, in the direction of the wind.” At the end of the decade, the Board of Engineers averred that Bridgewater’s fire alarm system was in first-class condition.³⁵

Maintaining, upgrading, and adding to existing firefighting apparatus were matters of constant concern to those who were appointed or volunteered to protect the town from the ever-present danger of

1902, pp. 96-100.

³⁴ BI, July 8, 1898, March 8, Aug. 23, 1901, June 10, 1904, April 7, May 5, 1905, March 6, May 18, 1906; “Fire Department,” Annual Town Report 1902 p. 96, 1903, pp. 51-55, 1905, p. 42, 1906, p. 50; “Town Officers for the Year 1906,” Annual Town Report, 1906, p. 7; for more about Jerome B. Rogers see pages 26-27, 79-80, in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910; for more about Frank Williams see pages 80-81 in the same essay; in August of 1901 there was talk about creating an organization of veteran firefighters, but this seems not to have been done.

³⁵ BI, June 7, 28, July 26, Dec. 13, 1901, Nov. 21, Dec. 12, 1902, Feb. 13, 27, April 10, 17, July 3, 24, Aug. 7, Sept. 4, 11, 1903, April 29, Aug. 12, 1904, Sept. 29, 1905, Feb. 16, March 9, 1906, Feb. 14, 28, 1908; “Fire Department,” Annual Town Report, 1901, p. 89, 1902, pp. 96, 99, 1903, p. 53, 1904, pp. 49-50, 1905, pp. 43-46, 1906, p. 48, 1908, p. 40, 1909, p. 40, 1910, p. 38; Louise Dickinson Rich, Innocence Under the Elms (Orleans, Massachusetts: Parnassus Imprints, 1955), p. 119; this source is a must for anyone trying to understand life in Bridgewater during the early

fires. What to do about the aging steam fire engine, *Silsby No. 6*, was among the most important problems of the Fire Department during the early twentieth century. Acquired in 1883 by the Fire District, this piece of equipment, housed in the School Street station, was in such poor condition by the early 1900's that it required repairs after each run. The Bridgewater correspondent of the Brockton Enterprise, putting it bluntly, wrote in August of 1901 that the "steamer is certainly in a very poor condition, and likely to give out at any time, and cannot be repaired without a large outlay." Things finally came to a head in 1903, when the state inspector of boilers condemned the engine, in effect disallowing its use. Perhaps motivated in part by self-interest, the Silsby Company thought it best for the town to purchase a new and larger one, in light of Bridgewater's growth during the preceding twenty years. After considering the cost of a new steamer, voters, with some shortsightedness, decided at a special town meeting that it would be acceptable to have the *Silsby* rebuilt at a cost of \$1700, about half the cost of a new steamer. The Silsby firm agreed to do the job, hauling the condemned engine by railroad to its plant in New York and lending the town a used steamer during the two months needed for the rebuilding task. By March of 1904, Bridgewater had a transformed fire steam engine. Six years later, a state inspector, after looking it over, complimented the Fire Department on keeping the steam engine in good condition. This evaluation, it might be noted, was shared by insurance inspectors.³⁶

Other less expensive types of equipment were also vital to combating fires. Periodically, hose footage was increased, so that the 2500 feet in 1902 became 4,000 feet in 1905, 300 of which was placed in the Scotland station. In each of the years from 1908 to 1910, the town voted to add five hundred additional feet. In July of 1902, a new hose wagon, financed by a special town appropriation, arrived at the School Street engine house, ready to carry 1200 feet of hose. "The wagon is a 'handsome kerrige,'" opined the Independent, "...and conforms to the specifications." Among other features, it was fitted with racks for chemicals, particularly useful in fighting the ubiquitous chimney fires of the early twentieth century. Just before Christmas in 1904, the fire engineers put in commission a sled to carry 1,700 feet of hose. One year later five new hand chemical extinguishers were added to the town's firefighting arsenal. From time to time new ladders had to be purchased, including the twenty-five foot one added to the equipment in 1902. Toward the end of the decade, the engineers began calling for a chemical wagon and, with an eye toward a more efficient fire alarm system, the replacement of a gravity battery by a storage battery with a five circuit switchboard at a cost of \$800.³⁷

As had been the case since the late 1880's, when the privately-owned Bridgewater Fire District had the responsibility for fighting fires, horses continued as the new century began to be indispensable to the town's efforts to protect its citizens from the scourge of fire. Publicly-owned and operated since 1894,

years of the twentieth century; "Dickinson, James H., 1866 to 1949--Newspaper publisher," HH, pp. 261-262.

³⁶ BI, Aug. 23, 1901, Nov. 13, 20, Dec. 4, 1903, Jan. 1, Feb. 12, March 25, 1904, Sept. 2, 1910; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1905, pp. 43-44; "Special Town Meeting, Dec. 1, 1903," Annual Town Report, 1903, p. 19; Pictorial History, 1987, pp. 48, 49.

³⁷ BI, June 7, 1901, July 18, Oct. 17, Nov. 14, 1902, Feb. 27, March 6, 13, April 16, Sept. 4, 1903, Feb. 12, Dec. 23, 1904, Jan. 27, June 9, 1905, March 9, 1906, March 1, 1907, Feb. 14, 28, Sept. 25, 1908; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1901, p. 89, 1902, p. 97, 1904, p. 50, 1905, pp. 43-45, 1907, p. 40, 1908, p. 42, 1909, p. 41, 1910, p.

the Fire Department in the late 1890's started to rely mostly on its own horses, quartered in the town stable to the rear of the engine house on School Street. If the need arose, however, the department could employ horses from private stables, in particular the one operated by E. N. Fisher on the western side of Central Square. For many years into the twentieth century, townsfolk fondly remembered the horses that pulled the steamer, the hook and ladder truck, and hose reels to the scene of a fire. Dickinson Rich poignantly expressed this sentiment when she later wrote: "But it was the horses that that gave elan to the spectacle of the fire department tearing to a fire. I know that probably a motor truck gets there quicker, but it doesn't seem to be going as fast...and doesn't seem to be participating the way the horses did." While there was some talk around 1910 of the possible use of motorized apparatus by the Fire Department, most citizens were not surprised when the department recommended the purchase of a new pair of horses. It would be another five years before these hardworking animals, who get little or no credit in what few brief accounts we have of Bridgewater's fire service, would begin to lose their prominent role in Bridgewater's fire service.³⁸

Much more on the minds of the fire chiefs, the other engineers, volunteer firefighters, and concerned citizens than the mode of transportation employed by the Fire Department was the physical condition of the School Street station, which housed most of the town's firefighting equipment. Unlike the hose tower and the structure for the hook and ladder truck, which filled in the space between the Town Hall and the main fire house and dated to the middle of the 1890's, the original two story brick station had been constructed back in 1857 to accommodate the needs of the Bridgewater Fire District. Hinting at what would become a major source of discontent for the fire department, Chief Fred C. Pratt wrote in his 1902 report: "The buildings are in fair condition" and "are in need of painting." Two years later, Pratt took a more forceful stand, asserting: "These buildings are old, [referring to the main building of the station, I assume] inconvenient and dangerous and not at all suitable to the needs of the department and should be replaced by a modern building in the near future." Chief William Marshall, echoing similar sentiments in his reports from 1906 to 1910, was especially blunt in his 1908 report, writing: "That none of men have been injured there is owing to the extreme caution they exercise, and not to any improvement in conditions. We are loath to believe that the voters have no regard for the safety of our firemen. Yet conditions menacing the men's lives every time they drive out of building are allowed to stand unchanged for years." Except for the small appropriation of \$125 to repair the School Street station, approved in 1910, at the town meeting, Marshall's exhortations appeared to have fallen on deaf ears of at least a majority of town voters. Pleading once more for "a suitable fire station in the center of the village," the Fire Chief reminded the voters that the neither the selectmen nor the fire engineers had the power build a new station and that "only the body of voters acting together can bring such things to pass." That the voters did take some action in 1911, which I will discuss in a future essay covering Bridgewater's fire

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³⁸ BI, June 7, 1901, Dec. 16, 1904, June 9, 1905, June 7, 1907; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1910, p. 40; Louise Dickinson Rich, Innocence Under the Elms, pp. 118-121; for more about the role of horses in Bridgewater's firefighting service see pages 4-7 in my essay on transportation in Bridgewater through 1910; History Highlights.

service between that year and 1925, perhaps did not lessen the doubts of some citizens about the efficacy of pure democracy in the form of a town meeting.³⁹

Most folks of the Scotland region, who with other townspeople witnessed the ten-year struggle to modernize the town's main firefighting facility on School Street, were most likely pleased when the town meeting in March of 1901, at least, appropriated funds to build a small firehouse in their outlying district. This action was prompted by decisions of the Fire Department the previous year to permit the formation of a company of fire volunteers in Scotland and to place in that southwestern part of Bridgewater the "Old Ousamequin," the hand-operated fire tub used by the Fire District beginning in 1851. The article voted on was straightforward: "To see what action the town will take with regard to the erection of a suitable building for the hand engine, *Ousamequin*, at Scotland village." Commenting on the ensuing debate, the Independent, evidently not overwhelmed by the project's import, observed: "Article 16 put the meeting in a high good humor--with the exception of a few of those few present." Those "few" included several well-known citizens of Scotland for whom the matter was of considerable concern. W. H. H. Andrews, the proprietor of a grocery store on the corner of Pleasant and Prospect Streets, understandably supported the project since his business was housed in a wooden building, still extant, that also served as a postal station and stop on the trolley line between Taunton and Bridgewater. In his opinion, seventy houses in Scotland could not count on fire service being provided by the central station on School Street. Arthur R. Tinkham, who in 1905 bought out Andrews's business (shortly thereafter the site began to be known as Tinkham's Corner), also supported the article, arguing for a permanent home for the old "machine." Known for his involvement in the commercial life of Scotland well into the twentieth century, Benjamin F. Ellis of Pleasant Street voiced his strong opposition to the appropriation for a small fire barn, suggesting instead that *Ousamequin* be kept in S. O. Keith's barn where it had been lodged on its arrival in Scotland several months earlier. If the engine needed to be used, Ellis argued, four or five men with "perhaps a few reliable old women and children" could haul it to the scene of a fire. After considerable discussion as to the cost and location of a small building, the meeting finally agreed to appropriate the princely sum \$200.00 to erect Bridgewater's second fire station.⁴⁰

Before the station was built that summer, the people of Scotland decided to have a practice run with the "old fire-tub," as the half-century old *Ousamequin* was dubbed. On Memorial Day, still widely known as Decoration Day, the engine "was brought forth" from S. O. Keith's barn where it had been housed for ten dollars a month after being hauled there from the School Street fire barn. Things did not go well at first, and the crowd of locals began "to feel disappointed." At this point, someone suggested that

1976, says nothing about horses in its discussion of the Bridgewater Fire Department.

³⁹ BI, Feb. 22, 1907, Feb. 28, 1908; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1902, p. 96, 1904, p. 49, 1905, p. 43, 1906, p. 48, 1907, p. 39, 1908, p. 39, 1909, pp. 39-42, 1910, p. 40; "Condensed Report of Town Meeting, March 1, 1909," Annual Town Report, 1909, p. 12; "Adjourned Town Meeting, March 10, 1910," Annual Town Report, 1910, p. 13.

⁴⁰ BI, March 27, 1886, March 8, 1901; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1901, p. 89; "Ellis, Benjamin Franklin, 1861 to 1939," HH, p. 262; for more on W. W. Andrews and Arthur R. Tinkham see pages 29, 87-88 in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910; over a decade earlier, there had been some talk of placing the *Ousamequin* at the Bridgewater Iron Works, off of High street on the Town River.

the apparatus “be hauled to the workshop of M. U. Smart,” a strong proponents of having a firebarn and street lighting in Scotland. After the engine was taken apart and a crack soldered, “the valves were put in order for trial run.” What better place to see if the “old tub” was of much worth than the rear of the Scotland Congregational Church where two feet of water in its cellar covered “the lower half of the furnace.” After lowering the suction tube into the cellar and making some adjustment so manpower was equally balanced, sixteen boys and men succeeded in getting the old engine to throw a stream “over the church spire.” “The people were amazed,” the Independent reported, “and not a few went home feeling proud of their old tub.” An added bonus was the lowering of the water to thirteen inches in the cellar.⁴¹

At a meeting on July 11, 1901, the Fire Department’s board of engineers awarded the contract to Smith and Clark for the erection of the new engine house. Its projected cost was \$200.00, and the site chosen was on Prospect Street, just south of the Scotland church on Pleasant Street. The contract date of August 15 for the completion of this one story wooden building was met, with the understanding that volunteers of Company Two would build a partition to create two rooms, one for housing the *Ousamequin* hand engine, the other serving as a meeting hall for the firefighters. Plans were soon being made by the company for a lawn party to celebrate Scotland’s latest acquisition. For the rest of the decade, the annual reports of Bridgewater’s fire chiefs mentioned the town’s two fire stations. Comments on the aging School Street facility, by far the more important, were increasingly critical. Little was said about the small fire barn in Scotland, other than it was “a one-story wooden building” and in “good condition.” How useful the old hand engine proved to be is difficult to say, but Fire Chief Marshall in 1905 recommended the “purchase of 5 Chemical Extinguishers, and a light wagon in which to carry them for use in Scotland,” arguing that its “lack of water” rendered this part of Bridgewater “practically without fire protection today.”⁴²

Despite the inadequacies of the main fire barn and the unwillingness of voters at town meetings to support appropriations to remedy the situation, those who owned property in Bridgewater expected the volunteer firefighters, who received nominal compensation for the time spent actually combating a blaze, to continue their courageous work in protecting the town from the ever-present danger of fires. The annual reports of the Fire Department from 1901 to 1910 show some variation in the yearly number of fires. A spate of them in October of 1901, for instance, caused the Independent to wonder if the establishment of a “regular paid department” would save the town money. The number of fires fluctuated anywhere between sixteen in 1902 and thirty-four in 1907, averaging out to about twenty-four a year. As the number of telephones in Bridgewater increased, especially after the New England Telephone Company began serving the town on October 1, 1900, albeit with one operator and eleven subscribers, this relatively new form of communication soon was used more frequently than fire alarms to alert the Fire Department of a particular blaze. Of the thirty-four calls for help in 1907, for example, nineteen of the thirty-four were

⁴¹ BI, March 8, June 7, 1901; K. Moore, Tales Around the Common, p. 5; for more about the Scotland church see pages 7-8, 45-50, in my essay on churches in Bridgewater through 1910.

⁴² BI, July 12, 26, Aug. 9, 16, 1901; “Fire Department,” Annual Town Report, 1901, p. 89, 1905, p. 45, 1910, p. 38; Townscape Institute, Form 194, pp. 458-459; this latter source helped me locate the site of the Scotland fire barn, a

made by telephone. These statistics, of course, do not tell the whole story since fires varied in their destructiveness, as did the amounts of insurance coverage carried by individual property owners.⁴³

By far, most of the time and energy of Bridgewater's volunteer firefighters was spent in extinguishing blazes that threatened to destroy the homes of individual citizens. In an age when wood and coal were used to heat houses, it is not surprising that chimney fires were the most common, perhaps because some homeowners did not regularly clean their chimneys or hire a sweeper to do so. Throughout the decade, the Independent carried short pieces about the Fire Department responding to calls about this type of fire in houses on such streets as Bedford, Church, High, Main, Oak, Plymouth, South, and Summer. Most of these blazes were easily contained by chemical extinguishers from the engine house before any serious damage was done. Such was not the case, however, early in the morning of December 16, 1904, when a chimney caught fire from a stove on the second floor of the house owned by J. P. Lovell on South Street. While the "department made a quick hitch" and "in short time had three streams going on the blaze," the inside of the house was "badly damaged." Fortunately no injuries occurred, and the owner's loss of "probably \$1,000," hardly an inconsequential sum at the time, was covered by some insurance. A fire of even direr consequences occurred on November 15, 1905. Thought to have been "caused by sparks from the chimney...., a fire "completely destroyed" the "house and barn" of Alba S. Sprague on Plymouth Street. Despite making "another record hitch," and "soon at the scene of the blaze," the firemen arrived to find buildings already a "total loss." Much of the furniture was saved by Daniel White, employed by Sprague as a farm hand, but, sadly, a valuable horse, two cows, "three tons of hay and a lot of corn fodder," and "a heavy farm wagon" were not spared by the conflagration. The house and barn were covered by insurance, but Sprague's personal property was not. Perhaps typical of a small town, Bridgewater citizens were soon responding to a request to bring contributions to A. I. Simmons's meat market in Central Square to help Sprague "in his hour of adversity."⁴⁴

Other causes of house fires included sparks from passing trains, accidents, and carelessness. In some instances, nefarious actions of incendiaries were suspected but not proven, with the origin of the blaze never determined. On June 4, 1901, "burning cinders" from a passing locomotive of the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad fell upon the dry shingles of the one and one-half house on Oak Street, owned by William Gardner. For over fifty years, he and an invalid son had occupied the dwelling, which stood "within 10 yards of the tracks," and had had no trouble with sparks from passing trains. Fortunately, on the day of the fire, their nearest neighbor, who for several years had been keeping a watchful eye on the situation, led the Gardners to safety, while another neighbor sounded an alarm "and soon as possible

structure that no longer exists.

⁴³ BI, June 6, 1885, Jan. 28, 1888, Sept. 5, 1891, May 11, 25, 1900, Oct. 25, 1901; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1901, p. 89, 1902, p. 98, 1903, p. 53, 1904, p. 50, 1905, p. 44, 1906, p. 48, 1907, p. 40, 1908, p. 40, 1909, p. 41, 1910, pp. 37-41; HH, p. 181; Gloria W. Moran, "Telephone Service," HH, pp. 60-61; at some point I plan to write more extensively about the growth of the telephone system in Bridgewater, which began in a small way in the 1880's; for more about fire insurance companies see pages 33-37, 98-99, in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910.

⁴⁴ BI, March 6, 13, April 16, Oct. 16, 1903, Feb. 5, 12, Dec. 16, 1904, Jan. 27, March 17, June 9, Nov. 17, 1905, Jan. 7, 1910.

the hook and ladder were on the scene.” Over 500 yards of hose were soon hooked up to the nearest hydrant, located at the head of Oak Street. A goodly portion of the house, only partially insured, was destroyed by fire and water. In November of 1902, a blaze threatened a dwelling, still extant, at 25 Cedar Street, a short walk from the School Street engine house, and might have led to a very serious conflagration, “as the buildings in that vicinity” were “very close together....” Originally built for Joseph A. Hyde, one of the partners of a cotton gin factory on Pearl Street, first president of the Bridgewater Savings Bank, 1872, and “generous patron of the New Jerusalem Church,” this house in the early 1900’s was owned by C. H. Pickering, a conductor on the railroad. While in the attic looking for “some papers,” Pickering accidentally dropped a lamp which exploded, causing the roof to catch fire. An alarm was sounded and with some initial help from several former volunteers of Company One, who had resigned earlier in the year over the refusal of the Board of Engineers to rehire W. E. Thomas as janitor of the School Street station, the department quickly quenched the fire “with three streams of water.” Luckily for Pickering, insurance covered the part of the roof “consumed” by the blaze and the extensive water damage done to the dwelling.⁴⁵

On occasion, the Fire Department was summoned to deal with a situation involving a barn, indicative of the significant role horses continued to play in providing transportation or pointing to the fact that Bridgewater had not lost all vestiges of its rural agricultural background. Early in February 1903, Company One responded to a fire, first spotted by Dr. Christian Washburn, to the rear of Conant’s barn on Church Street, a thoroughfare running along the side of Central Square Congregational Church, connecting South and Union Streets. Notwithstanding a prompt turn out by volunteer fire fighters, about “ten tons of fine hay,” which were not covered by insurance, were “ruined by smoke and water.” An investigation soon revealed that the blaze had been set by two eight old year boys, who in all probability had no idea such a fire could have quickly spread to the many wooden houses and commercial buildings in the highly compact area of Central Square and its environs. Two years later, a fire resulting in a much greater loss destroyed the barn of A. Rhonstrom in the more rural section of South Street. Caused by a heifer overturning a lantern placed on the floor by Mrs. Rhonstrom, flames soon engulfed the building. A call was made by telephone, and the fire apparatus was quickly on its way to the scene of the fire, perhaps passing a trolley on the tracts between Bridgewater and Middleboro. By the time the firefighters arrived, however, the barn was already down. Fortunately, the part of Rhonstrom’s house nearest the barn was saved by a few men from the nearby Town Farm, including its Superintendent Neil J. Deering, who had the foresight to douse that part of the property with water. The owner, nevertheless, sustained a loss of about \$2,000, with insurance covering about half of this amount.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ BI, June 7, Oct. 25, 1901, Nov. 21, 28, 1902, July 19, 26, 1907; Townscape Institute, Form 31, pp. 125-126.

⁴⁶ BI, Feb. 13, 1903, Jan. 13, June 16, 1905, Feb. 13, 20, 1920; Crane, 763-794, 809; Townscape Institute, Form 58, pp. 186-187; Dr. Christian Washburn, who practiced dentistry in Bridgewater before moving to nearby Plymouth in 1907, was the son of Nahum Washburn, credited as “the pioneer in the practice of dentistry in Southeastern Massachusetts” by Joshua E. Crane in his 1884 History of Bridgewater; at the time of the fire described above, Dr. Christian Washburn occupied the house built by his father around 1845, which still stands on Church Street to the rear of Central Square Church; at some point in my writing, I plan to write about agriculture in Bridgewater, stressing the

Along with the ever-present danger of house fires, Bridgewater, along with other towns of Plymouth County, had to contend with outbreaks of brush, field and forest blazes. As indicated above, the stated policy of the Fire Department was to have the town inhabitants rely on appointed Fire Wardens, who were assigned to different areas, to organize neighborhood men to fight these fires. Instead of using the town's alarm system, folks were told to reach the wardens or fire stations by telephone, the increasingly popular communication device, which by 1910 had 359 local subscribers. Depending on the availability of telephones, distances of such fires from the School Street station, the propinquity of houses to the blazes, and, in some cases, lack of public awareness, the Fire Department's policies were not always followed. Perhaps dry weather was partly responsible for three brush fires that broke out in the spring of 1904. Commenting about a blaze on "Skeeter Mill Road," officially accepted by the town as Water Street in 1851, the Independent informed its readers somewhat cavalierly that the "Prattown neighborhood [an outlying area in the eastern part of Bridgewater] came into the brush fire excitement Tuesday...." Led by Warden Philip H. Wing, "a gang of men," had the fire out after a few hours. A week later, a grass and brush fire started around the house of James A. Murray on Oak Street, located northwest of the town's center. With dwellings on both sides of the blaze, the Fire Department deemed it prudent to respond to an alarm, and the volunteers of Company One were quickly on their way. After a short delay caused by sand getting into its axle, the hose wagon drawn by horses arrived on the scene, and firefighters soon had the "flames under control." A brush fire of far more serious consequences occurred about a month later near the Bridgewater-Raynham line. The fire warden and his crew of neighborhood men had a difficult time in containing the blaze which "burned over 50 acres" before being put out. To what extent brush fires also involved destruction of extensive stands of trees in Bridgewater during the decade is difficult to say. My research reveals no large forest fires between 1900-1910 comparable to the one on Great Hill in 1899 (see page-15). A meeting of the fire engineers on June 7, 1905, however, was held to "to act on bills arising from the recent forest fires." Several hundred dollars were needed to cover the expenses.⁴⁷

Financial and emotional losses sustained by townsfolk in seeing their houses and landscapes wholly or partly destroyed by destructive blazes were hardly inconsequential. In comparison to the late nineteenth century, however, Bridgewater in the early 1900's witnessed only a few major non-residential fires. Other than slight damage to Scotland's old Congregational meeting house caused by flames from an overheated furnace in March of 1903, the town's churches went unscathed in these years. The same was true for Bridgewater Normal School and the State Farm, in part because these two state institutions by this

years from the late nineteenth century to 1925; the so-called Town Farm which sheltered a small number of people in need will be part of this story; my readers might wish to consult my essay on transportation in Bridgewater through 1910 for an extensive discussion of the trolley system in Bridgewater through 1910.

⁴⁷ BI, Sept. 15, 1888, March 11, April 18, May 6, 1904, Feb. 24, April 14, June 9, 1905, May 18, 1906, May 31, 1907, Aug. 12, 1910; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1906, p. 50, 1908, p. 41; according to a 1888 survey, Plymouth County had more woodland than any other county in Massachusetts; the words wards and wardens seemed to be used interchangeably in the town reports; I wish to thank Robert Wood of the Bridgewater Historical Commission for alerting me to the existence of a list of Bridgewater streets and when they were officially accepted by the town; thanks also to Ronald R. Adams, Town Clerk, for making a copy of this list for me.

time consisted mainly of stone and brick buildings. Small blazes occasionally did threaten some of the wooden buildings housing the town's retail and service enterprises. In the fall of 1901, a small fire on the roof of Balboni's fruit store, established four years earlier on Broad Street, would have been more damaging had it not been for the quick response of the fire department. About a year later, an overheated chimney at this same location again resulted in little damage, despite the lack of available horses delaying the arrival of the 1883 Silsby fire engine. The department was credited by the Independent early in December of 1901 with doing "good work on Broad Street" when "it looked as though nothing but Providence could save the buildings to the north of Broadbent's restaurant" from being consumed by fire. Probably caused by a spark from a locomotive, the coal sheds of the N.Y., N. H. and H., located near the Perkins foundry off Broad Street, caught fire in early April of 1903. Company One responded immediately, putting out the fire with a chemical extinguisher before any great loss occurred. In what appears to have been an almost annual event, the fire department again responded to an alarm on November 8, 1905, calling it to Balboni's stand. This time the culprit was an exploding lamp, and once more firefighters quenched the blaze "before any damage was done."⁴⁸

Bridgewater manufacturing enterprises were not immune to the threat of fire, a sobering consideration in a town where the great majority of workers found employment in companies devoted to producing shoes, iron and steel products, or bricks. Less than a week before Christmas in 1906, the fire department was called out to battle "a stubborn fire" on Perkins Street, in a small building housing forty barrels of cement, a product used by W. H. McElwain shoe manufacturing company, by far Bridgewater's largest employer at this time. The blaze, almost incredulously, had started when Michael Lynch, an employee in the sole leather room, went to fetch one of these barrels and stepped on a match, left on the floor by some careless person. In a "remarkably" short time, all of the barrels were "enveloped in flame," posing a threat to the company's main building, a large wooden structure, built in 1898 and located only thirty feet from the blazing storage facility. The firefighters lost no time in reaching the scene of the fire and with the assistance of factory workers "soon had the barrels out of the house, and out of danger." With water proving of little value in quenching the flames, made more intense by a "small quantity of gasoline" in the building, this so-called "cement house" was "practically destroyed." Fortunately, the financial loss was "slight" and, even more importantly, the manufacturing plant was spared. The impact of the blaze on Michael Lynch was a different story, however. With "considerable difficulty," he had escaped the burning building and by rolling about on the ground had extinguished the flames consuming his clothes. After being taken to the factory office, Lynch was "removed to the office of Dr.

⁴⁸ Oct. 25, July 5, Dec. 13, 1901, July 27, 1902, March 20, April 16, 1903, Nov. 10, 1905; for more about the Scotland church fire see page 47 in my essay on churches in Bridgewater through 1910; for more about Balboni's enterprise see pages 27-28, 82-83, in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater through 1910; none of the fires mentioned so far for the period from 1901 to 1910 are cited in Pratt, "The First Hundred Years" or in the chronology found in History Highlights; as we shall in a future essay, the stone and brick buildings of the Normal School were destroyed in the 1924 fire; at this point I know little about Charles H. Broadbent, except that he was from Plymouth, had worked at the Vendome in Boston, and bought the Broad Street restaurant in July of 1901.

[Franklin L.] Warren” in Central Square where his “very serious” wounds were dressed.⁴⁹

The Henry Perkins Co., which dates its origin to 1848, but was not incorporated as such until 1902, continued to be referred to by most folks in Bridgewater as the Perkins foundry well into the twentieth century. Whatever nomenclature was used, this enterprise was visited by three fires in the first decade of the new century. None of them might be classified as major blazes threatening the existence or steady progress of what was already labeled the town’s oldest family-run manufacturing enterprise, a distinction it still holds as this essay is being written. Located off Broad Street and along the eastern side of the railroad tracks since 1864-1865, Perkins’s brick facility in the early 1900’s had two main neighbors across the rails, the factories of the Continental Cotton Gin and McElwain companies. On July 5, 1901, the Independent, briefly reporting about a recent fire at the Perkins foundry, makes no mention of the role, if any, played by the fire department in fighting the blaze. It was estimated that damage to a roof, including a “large quantity” of broken slate, would total \$400.00. To make repairs and needed improvements, such as the relining of the foundry’s furnace, the decision was made to close the facility for three days, a necessary step, but perhaps not welcomed by workers who most likely received no compensation for the unanticipated “vacation.” The foundry “was again visited by fire” in April of 1904. Caused by sparks from the cupola, a blaze started in “an old gutter” and was soon working “up under the slate roof.” This time an alarm was sounded, and the recently rebuilt *Silsby*” steam fire engine, hauled by horses, was soon on its way down Broad Street. Perhaps the volunteer firefighters of Company One were a bit disappointed to find the blaze already extinguished by the time the apparatus arrived. More important for all concerned, the fire had caused little damage. In the spring of 1910, a third fire destroyed one of Perkins’s buildings, which had been used by the LeBaron Foundry Co. since 1908. When it was decided not to replace this structure, E. L. Baron, who hailed from nearby Middleboro, made plans for the erection of a new foundry in the Campello section of Brockton.⁵⁰

Far more important to Bridgewater’s economy than the Perkins enterprise during the early 1900’s was the Stanley Works, successor to Lazell, Perkins & Co. and afterwards known as the Bridgewater Iron Co. Unlike its predecessors, which were known for their cast iron works, the Bridgewater branch of the Connecticut-based Stanley outfit was devoted to manufacturing steel to be used in such products as “butts, hinges and all kinds of builders’ hardware.” As the town’s biggest taxpayer and second largest employer, with “about 250 hands” by 1910, a conflagration at Stanley’s sprawling facility at its High-Street Town River site could have dealt a blow to the local economy. While no such catastrophe occurred, a “furious” blaze on High Street in July of 1907 damaged a house and destroyed its adjoining barn, located near and owned by the Stanley Works. Rented by Timothy Madden, most likely an employee of the company, the house was quickly threatened by sparks from a bonfire in back of the

⁴⁹ BI, Sept. 6, 1901, Dec. 21, 1906; “Warren, Franklin L., M. D., 1871 to 1941--Physician,” HH, p. 279; “Accepted Streets,” Town of Bridgewater, p. 11; I remind my readers once more that the McElwain Company had agreed in 1900 to place on its roof a steam chime whistle to alert the whole town when a fire broke out; by the early 1900’s McElwain’s labor force numbered over 700.

⁵⁰ BI, July 5, 1901, April 29, 1905, April 22, 29, 1910; HH, p. 48; for more about the Henry Perkins Co. see pages 16-18, 58-60, in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910.

barn. That a good part of the house was spared was attributed to “the efficient work of the fire brigade of the Stanley Works” before the arrival of the town’s fire department. Insurance covered losses amounting to about \$800. John Altier, a member of company’s brigade, and an “unknown Italian, employed” at the Works, sustained injuries that required medical attention.⁵¹

On occasion, the fire department was called out to battle a blaze threatening some structure of an enterprise that relied on a particular natural resource found in the environs of Bridgewater. On May 8, 1905, thanks to “a very quick hitch” of the town’s fire apparatus, the volunteers of Company One were soon headed east on Summer Street, responding to a blaze at Gilbert O. King’s saw mill off Flagg Street, caused by sparks from a passing locomotive. In about eighteen minutes, water was being doused on the flames, probably saving “quantities of valuable lumber, and possibly the mill itself....” Noting that the fire was about a mile and a half from the School Street station, the Independent reminded the town of “of the fire protection which our company gives to those who live at some distance from the centre....” Two years later, on April 27, the town’s firefighters, again displaying their ability to quickly come to the aid of an industry taking advantage of a local resource, headed eastward on Plymouth Street to the yard of the New England Brick Company, a conglomerate of smaller enterprises, which in 1900 had absorbed G. M. Hooper & Co., a local endeavor engaged in brick making for about seventy years. In this instance, a blaze at one of the buildings occupied by some of the company’s laborers started from a cooking stove and “had a good start before it was discovered.” The men were at home at the time and fortunately each of them was able to escape, carrying a “bunk and a kit of clothes....” It was reported that with “a few minutes” work the department saved the building.”⁵²

None of the Bridgewater fires cited so far were insignificant to those who were injured and/or incurred financial losses. Two conflagrations during this decade, however, proved especially disastrous for the companies involved and, at the same time, had the potential of adversely affecting the town’s economy. The following headlines of the Independent on August 21, 1908, succinctly summarizes the devastating impact of one of them, which occurred in Prattown:

JENKINS LEATHERBOARD MILL BURNED
Valuable Stock and Machinery Go Up in Smoke
Disastrous Fire Causes \$50,000 Loss
Ten Buildings Burned, 35 Hands Idle. Will Probably Re-
build on Same Site.⁵³

⁵¹ BI, July 19, 1907, Feb. 11, 1910; for more about the Stanley works see pages 48-54 in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910.

⁵² BI, May 12, 1905, May 3, 1907, June 13, 1924; “King, Gilbert--Farmer,” HH, p. 269; “Hooper, George M., 1838 to 1909--Manufacturer,” HH, p. 266; for more about King’s saw mill see pages 72-73 in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910; for more about the Hooper--New England Brick Yard see pages 21, 33, and 62-63, in the same source.

⁵³ BI, Aug. 21, 1908.



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Jenkins Leatherboard Mill
Prattown
Fire, 1908
(Rizer Collection)

From 1895 to 1908, the Jenkins mill, located on Plymouth Street, where it crosses over the Town River, had become a flourishing enterprise, specializing in the manufacturing of leatherboard, a product consisting of scrap leather and waste paper used in the making of shoe soles and heels. The company's good fortune and, indeed, its survival were seriously challenged, however, on the Sunday afternoon of August 16, 1908, by one of the most devastating fires in Bridgewater's history. A "blaze in some waste at the rear of the main mill" was first spotted by Eddie Harvey, who lived in the vicinity. News of the fire was soon relayed by telephone to the home of Fire Chief Marshall, who "in short order...pulled the alarm." Awaiting the arrival of the department's volunteers and apparatus, Jenkins's workmen and neighbors "made heroic efforts to stay the onward march of the fire fiend," but to no avail; they did save "four horses, wagons and harnesses from the barn...." Responding "in quick time," two companies of volunteers were at the scene of fire "inside of 25 minutes, ... at the highest speed that could be obtained from the horses, over the heavy and hilly roads." Dramatically capturing the extent of the conflagration facing the firefighters on arrival, the Independent's reporter wrote: "The scene ... was one of seething and roaming flames, with dense volumes of smoke rising above and tongues of fire leaping high into the air, the whole plant in the short space of half an hour being one mass of flames." "As the day wore on...the fire in the town of leatherboard showed no signs of abatement," despite the strenuous labors of the "fire lads" and their use of "immense quantities of water." It was not until eight o'clock on Monday morning that the volunteers, many of whom had "willingly" served for nineteen hours, returned to the fire station. By then, however, the Jenkins leatherboard manufacturing facility lay in ruins. The saving of the company's safe, several homes in the area, and the old saw mill on the river from the ravages of fire was of some solace. Far more significant, the conflagration resulted in no injuries or deaths.⁵⁴

Thinking that their labors were over and having done the best they could, most of the firefighters were soon home in bed, getting some needed and well-deserved rest. Much to their surprise, they were awakened shortly after three o'clock that afternoon by the sounding of the alarm. The "smouldering leather board" had "again burst into flames, with a stiff wind blowing from the south, endangering" once more the houses of F. A. Wallace and Thomas Coleman, both of which had been saved the previous day. Quickly responding to the latest alarm, the volunteers were soon at the ruins of the Jenkins mill, using the re-built *Silsby* engine to throw streams of water on the re-ignited fire. But much to chagrin of all, the steamer was put out of commission by a "little nut" which got sucked into the engine, an accident that could not have been "foreseen and avoided." At this point, Chief Marshall decided to telephone the Taunton's Fire Department for help. This city's fire force, which had become increasingly professionalized since the 1860's, responded immediately, not only sending their "Steamer 2" to Bridgewater but also an engineer, who made the trip by automobile. Thanks to the "Taunton machine"

⁵⁴ BI, Aug. 21, 1908; "Fire Department," Annual Town Report, 1908, p. 40; Pratt, The First Hundred Years; the Jenkins Mill fire is one of the two listed by Pratt for the years 1901 to 1910; "George O. Jenkins Company," Bridgewater Book; Townscape Institute, Form 191, pp. 452-453; D. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p. 19; D. Moore, "George O. Jenkins Company," HH, p. 88; HH, p. 182; Pictorial History, 1987, pp. 57, 58; 1994, p. 30; for more about the Jenkins mill see pages 20-21, 47-48, in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater through 1910; my primary sources vary in citing leatherboard as one or two words.

and “the heavy rain that began falling early in the evening” the blaze was finally subdued. Visiting the smoldering ruins on Tuesday, George O. Jenkins, the company’s president, who continued to make his home in nearby Whitman, evidently indicated his intention to rebuild the facility, which had sustained a loss of about \$ 50,000, part of which was covered by insurance. This was “pleasing news to Prattown people” and Bridgewater merchants, whose businesses could be adversely impacted by the greatly reduced income of forty families in a town of about 7,000, a figure including the 1,000 or so “residents” of the State Farm. Since national unemployment compensation had not yet been legislated, Jenkins workers were faced with the most immediate problem -- securing work elsewhere until a new plant was erected. A new facility was constructed in 1909, and in January of the following year fires were “started under the boilers” of the new Jenkins leatherboard mill.⁵⁵

The other major conflagration of the decade took place on the night of May 12, 1910. Quickly reporting on the fire the following day, the Independent’s headlines read:

EASTERN GRAIN CO’S.
ELEVATOR BURNED
Cause Unknown-Loss From \$35,000 to \$50,000
Will Rebuild ⁵⁶

Located at the intersection of Plymouth Street and the eastern side of the railroad tracks, on a site once occupied by McElwain’s first shoe mill, the Eastern Grain Company had been founded in the late 1890’s by Walter S. Little, J. Gardner Bassett, and Hosea Kingman. With the death of Kingman, a highly respected Bridgewater lawyer, in 1900, and Bassett turning his attention a year later to the manufacturing of bricks, Little took sole control of the enterprise in 1902. For the next eight years, this outfit showed steady growth, allowing Little and his wife, nee Flora Townshend, both of whom were becoming prominent citizens of Bridgewater, to build their impressive house which still stands at Fifteen Plymouth Street, not far from present-day Pope Hall, a women’s dormitory of Bridgewater State College. While hindsight tells us that Little would go on to successfully conduct his business until 1936, its hopes for continuing prosperity, and perhaps even survival, were jeopardized by the fire, described as “hotter than blazes,” that engulfed the company’s grain elevator on that May night in 1910.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ BI, Aug. 21, Sept. 4, 1908, Oct. 1, 1909, Jan. 7, April 8, 15, 1901; “Fire Department,” Annual Town Report, 1908, p. 40; Bridgewater Book; Townscape Institute, p. 37; Form 191, p. 452; Census of Massachusetts, 1905, Vol. I, p. 819; Orra L. Stone, History of Massachusetts Industries--Their Inceptions, Growth, and Success (Boston-Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1930), Vol. II, p. 1197; according to Stone, the Jenkins Company had “100 operatives” in 1930 and had become the largest manufacturer of leather board in the United States; Hanna, A History of Taunton Massachusetts, pp. 244-247, 258, 328-329.

⁵⁶ BI, May 13, 1910.

⁵⁷ BI, Feb. 10, May 19, 1899, Jan. 17, 1908, D. Moore, “Eastern Grain Company,” HH, p. 88; HH, pp. 181, 182, 183; “Town of Bridgewater: Accepted Streets,” p. 11; Pratt, “The First Hundred Years,” Pictorial History, 1987, p. 57; in February of 1898, a bit ironically, fire had also destroyed the first McElwain’s factory, prompting the company to move its operations to a new facility between the railroad tracks and what would officially become Perkins Street in 1899; for more about the Eastern Grain Company see pages 67-69 in my essay on manufacturing in Bridgewater

Just what started the blaze remains somewhat of a mystery, with speculation that the cause might have been “either one of three sources, wires, combustion of dust, or a hot box in a nest of machinery, near which the fire was first discovered.” Responding to the alarm, volunteers in charge of the “hose wagon and ladder made good time” leaving the School Street Station and reaching the scene of the fire less than a half mile away. Things did not go as well for those manning the *Silsby* steam engine, however. With its regular driver not hearing the alarm and the apparatus going to the “wrong locality” at first, it was forty minutes before streams of water were being pumped on the blazing structure. Adding to this precarious situation, a large number of the volunteer firefighters were out of town during the “early part of the fire....”

Once the forces of the department were in place, the firemen made an “heroic” effort to save the burning property, meeting with only partial success, however. Loss of the main elevator where much of the grain was stored was somewhat compensated by the saving of two store houses, including their contents; thus the company could continue its business, albeit in cramped quarters. As in the case of the Jenkins fire two years earlier, the safe was safely removed from the office, threatened not by fire, but by flooding water. Some of the firemen, including the newly elected captain, Roy Hooper and First Lieutenant Price, were either overcome by smoke or burned when water came into contact with “lubricating oil, axle grease and paints, of which the company carried quite a line....” It was not until early the following morning that the “all out” was sounded; even then two men were left on guard, lest “the smouldering fire beneath the pyramids of grain,” burst once more into flames.⁵⁸

The fire department came in for its share of criticism on a number of points, including not using hydrants closer to the blaze and the “lack of well-directed effort at the nozzle end,” and, of course, the delay in the arrival of the steamer. Yet in all fairness, as the Independent reminded its readers, the town did not have enough volunteer firefighters who were willing to “place themselves in danger of loss of limb and life....” In a public communication, Little “expressed his appreciation of the good work done by the fire company,” especially in “saving the large sheds adjoining the elevator” and “moving valuables to places of safety.” Of greater long-ranged import for Bridgewater was Little’s decision to continue the business and rebuild the elevator “at once.” By the middle of July construction began, with the prediction that it would result in “the largest and most modern,” plant of its kind “in this section of the state.” This grain business would remain an important component of Bridgewater’s economy for many years to come.⁵⁹

through 1910.

⁵⁸ BI, May 13, 20, 1910

⁵⁹ BI, May 13, 20, July 15, 1910.

A Note to my Readers

As I continue my work, I plan to write an essay on Bridgewater's Fire Department between 1911 and 1925, a topic which I have already researched. These were significant years for this town service, which witnessed, among other things, renovations of the School Street station, the motorization of the fire apparatus, the establishment of the first permanent and professional firefighting force, and several major fires, including the ones that destroyed much of the Bridgewater Normal School and the Virginia Block, a building constructed in 1913 on the corner of Main and Broad Streets.

About the Author

Benjamin A. Spence, a native of Fall River, Massachusetts, a city about twenty miles south of Bridgewater, began his education in the public schools of that community. He attended Bridgewater State College between 1955 and 1959, earning his undergraduate degree in secondary education and history. After teaching social studies at the junior-senior high school level in Somerset, Massachusetts, for two years, he went on to receive his MS, 1962, and PhD, 1971, in history from the University of Wisconsin. Almost all of Dr. Spence's teaching career was spent at Bridgewater State. Following his retirement in 1995, he began to do historical research on the Town of Bridgewater, concentrating mainly on the first quarter of the twentieth century, a period of American history in which he specialized.